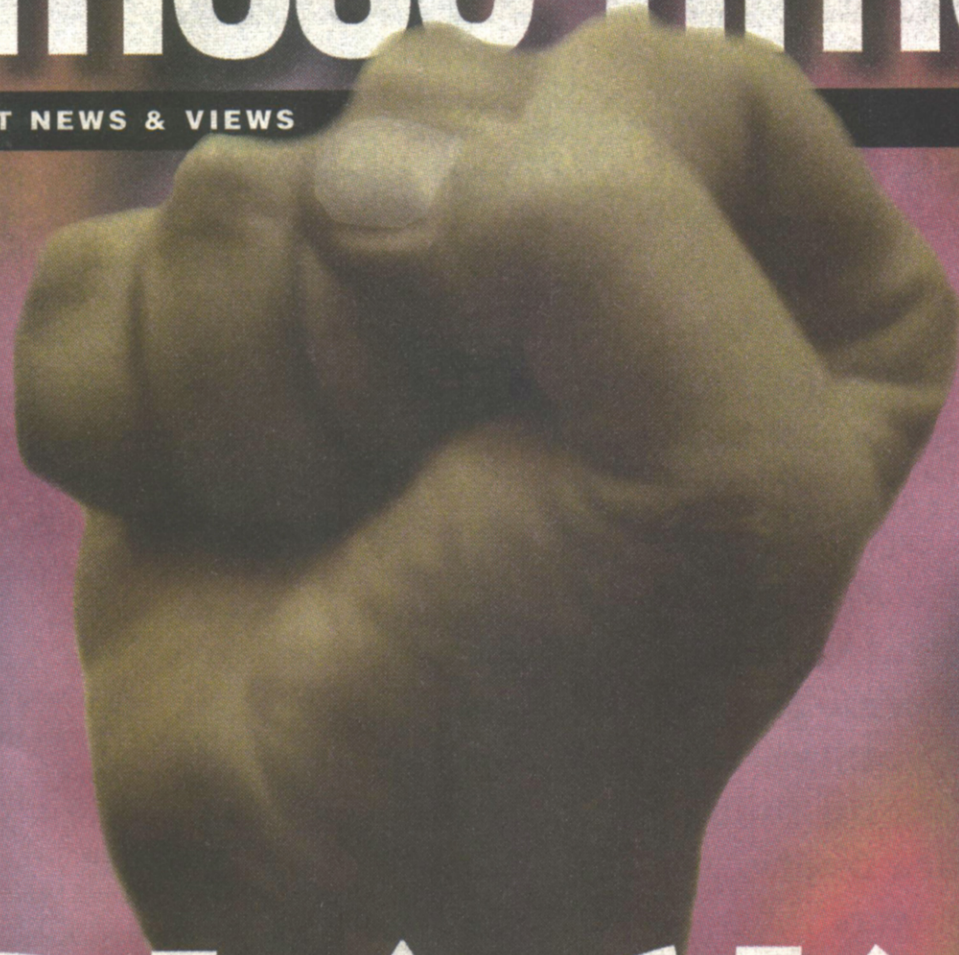


ROCKEFELLER'S LEGACY • GARY WEBB'S DARK ALLIANCE

In These Times

INDEPENDENT NEWS & VIEWS

July 12, 1998



BLACK RADICALISM

Where do we go from here?

SALIM MUWAKKIL • MICHAEL ERIC DYSON • BARBARA RANSBY



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The Two Black Americas

On June 19 to 21, Chicago plays host to two events that are eerily emblematic of black America's two diverging classes.

At the University of Illinois-Chicago, several hundred black intellectuals, activists and artists will convene the first Black Radical Congress. Organizers of the event are trying to revive a radical tradition that reaches back several centuries—from the slave insurrections and struggles by militant abolitionists of the 18th and 19th centuries, to the labor activists and civil rights agitators of the past hundred years. Although the term "radical" has faded into obscurity—and even infamy—this radical tradition includes most of black America's most revered freedom-fighters.

But in these times of low unemployment, bull markets and bulging sport utility vehicles, freedom-fighting is not high on black America's agenda. Certainly, it's a safe bet that radicalism won't be on the minds of those black people who gather on the very same day, four miles to the east of the congress, at Chicago's Black Expo. Black Expo, an annual orgy of consumerism oriented toward the metropolitan region's enormous black middle class, is expected to attract several thousand visitors to its fashion shows, celebrity guest appearances and wide array of shopping venues. "Shop, shop, shop 'till you sho-nuff drop" is one of the event's advertising slogans.

For many Americans, events like Black Expo seem like the best we can do. "Everyone's a capitalist now," says Edward Gordon, a South Side janitor and union man. "The argument's over." The congress is trying to break through this sense of resignation and redeem the radical label. There is probably nothing anyone could say to dissuade the thousands of black consumers who will file onto Soldier Field for this year's Black Expo. But there are many reasons to continue to push for a radical politics in the black community.

After all, the economic boom of the mid-'90s has yet to lift the fortunes of all but a few African-Americans. More black people are in prison now than ever before. Homelessness is a growing problem, as the government slashes welfare roles and phases out rent-subsidy programs. African-American children are notoriously undereducated. And blacks are twice as likely to be unemployed than whites.

What's more, income inequality is growing faster among African-Americans than it is among other segments of the population. According to William Julius Wilson, an urban sociologist at Harvard University, the richest one-fifth of African-Americans earn 50 percent of the total income of the black community. As the black middle class does better, the rest of the black community remains mired in disproportionate misery.

Despite this distressing state of affairs, full-fledged efforts to resist the roll-back of the welfare state have been few and far between. The October 1995 Million Man March was fueled, in part, by growing outrage at America's conservative movement. However, the spirit of the march was muffled by the theocratic rhetoric of its sponsor, the Nation of Islam.

Instead of linking public policy demands to that massive demonstration of discontent, marchers returned home intent on changing themselves. In some ways, the march's agenda echoes approaches that traditionally have kept black progressives and nationalists at odds. But the event also revealed considerable concert between two ideologies that have long divided black activists.

At the time, progressive analysts ceded victory to the Nation of Islam and its charismatic leader, Min. Louis

Farrakhan. Expressions of internal agency like the march (and last year's Million Woman March in Philadelphia) sharpened the issues of debate in the black community and helped mobilize those on the black left.

The congress elaborates and distills the spirit that fueled the March. For instance, black progressives no longer argue much about the need to build communities free of sexism, patriarchy and homophobia; the centrality of gender politics is no longer a subject of debate. The congress is also adamant in its intention to maintain and cultivate coalitions with other oppressed groups. Race is a critical, but not a confining, issue. As income disparities within black America grow, the significance of class will increase.

The Black Radical Congress will try to mobilize a radical response to the nation's rightward swing. Will it be able to convert the thousands of African-Americans who, just a few miles away, will no doubt make Black Expo a success?—S.M.

***In these times of
low unemployment,
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bulging sport utility
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on black America's
agenda.***

In These Times

INDEPENDENT NEWS & VIEWS

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Volume 22, Number 16

features

- 10 **Gary Webb's Dark Alliance** BY GARY WEBB
The controversial journalist tells his side of the story.
- 14 **Black Radicalism: Where Do We Go From Here?** BY SALIM MUWAKKIL
Developing a left politics for African-Americans.
- 17 **Pulpit Politics** BY MICHAEL ERIC DYSON
Religion and the black radical tradition.
- 20 **Fear of a Black Feminist Planet** BY BARBARA RANSBY
Gender, sexuality and black liberation.
- 30 **In The End: The Conscienceless Conservative** BY JIM MCNEILL
Barry Goldwater, Edward C. Banfield and the decline of public housing.

news

- 4 **In Short**
Latino power in California politics and mayhem at a Mexican maquiladora.
- 6 **Appall-O-Meter** BY DAVID FUTRELLE
- 7 **Media Critic** BY NEIL DEMAUSE
Same old welfare stories.

views

- 1 **Editorial: The Two Black Americas**
- 3 **Letters**
- 8 **Viewpoint** BY AIMIE GRESHAM AND NATHAN NEWMAN
The case for ProPAC.
- 9 **Forgotten America** BY JUAN GONZALEZ
Rockefeller's legacy.

reviews

- 23 **Books: A Place for Us and A Passion for Democracy**
By Benjamin R. Barber REVIEWED BY ROBERT WESTBROOK

Letters

Nuking Dinner

Larry Lack's "Cooking with Nuclear Waste" (June 14) attacks food irradiation as a ploy by the Department of Energy and the nuclear power industry. Lack ignores the problem of bacterial contamination of food. Estimates of the number of people affected by food-borne illness in the United States range from 6 million to 30 million annually, with as many as 9,000 deaths. Many readers will recall the contaminated Jack In The Box hamburgers that poisoned and killed several people a few years ago.

Irradiation can kill bacteria, preventing food-borne illness. There has been extensive testing of food irradiation for decades, and no ill effects have been uncovered. For these reasons, food irradiation has been endorsed by the American Dietetic Association, the American Medical Association and the World Health Organization.

Agribusiness has long wanted to introduce food irradiation, but has been thwarted by groups like Food and Water. In this case, Food and Water seems to be wrong on the merits of the issue. Food irradiation is a valuable public health measure.

John W. Farley
Henderson, Nev.

Smoke and Mirrors

Having just read Frederick Clarkson's "The Clinton Contrasts' Smoke and Mirrors" (May 3), I thought I should add that the Council for National Policy (CNP) was the brainstorm of fundamentalist

minister Tim LaHaye. He was aided by Larry McDonald, and financed by Williams Cies and T. Cullen Davis.

In *These Times* readers who would like to know more about CNP, including a complete list of members and biographical information, should check out our Web site, <http://www.ifas.org>, and click on the unofficial CNP information page.

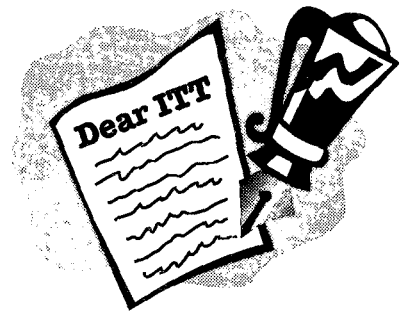
Skipp Porteous
National Director
Institute for First Amendment Studies
New York

Talkin' Back

jMierda! Rebeca Itzkowich's argument in favor of bilingual instruction ("Asset or Handicap?" June 14) is one of the stupidest I have ever heard. Anyone who has seen young children in an environment where their usual tongue is not spoken, has noticed that it does not take them five to seven years to acquire new language skills.

I left my 3-year-old, who was raised in a Spanish-speaking environment, in the United States while I attended a seminar in Mexico. I returned after a month to find that he spoke English, which was the language of the sandbox. As a young adult, he is now rediscovering his linguistic heritage.

There is a difference between bilingualism and biculturalism. I support multilingualism and multiculturalism, and I am embarrassed that I curse fluently in only two languages.



I know the Brits killed Gaelic, my family's native tongue. But they did not silence the great Irish poets, playwrights and novelists. We still drink Irish coffee and enjoy *River Dance*.

Yes, there are costs when a language dies. But the more important costs, in my judgment, are paid by youngsters and young adults put at a disadvantage because they lack command of the dominant language. People need to learn English—the sooner, the better.

Patricia Garrett
Raleigh, N.C.

Correction

The June 14 article "Vacation Consternation" by David Dyssegaard Kallick included an error. The unemployment rate in Denmark, not the rate of inflation, is 7 percent.

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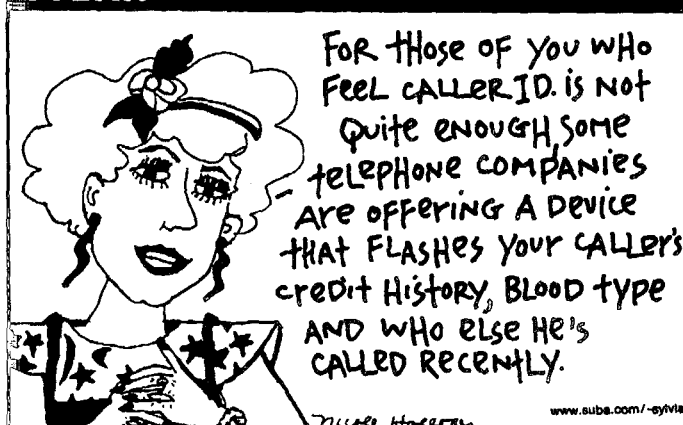
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SYLVIA



By Nicole Hollander



Awakening the Giant

BY JAMES B. GOODNO

Guillermo Rodriguez sounds surprisingly upbeat in the aftermath of California's June 2 primary. As expected, voters approved Proposition 227, an ugly initiative ending bilingual education in the state's public schools, with 61 percent of votes cast in its favor. But the high turnout of Latino voters, who helped to nominate four Latino candidates for statewide office and to defeat the anti-labor Proposition 226, cheered up the executive director of the Latino Issues Forum. "I hope we have put to rest this notion of Latinos as the sleeping giant of California politics," Rodriguez says. "We are very much awake."

Latino participation in California electoral politics has been growing steadily in the '90s. Four years ago, Latinos made up 9 percent of the primary electorate; in November 1996, 11.5 percent of California's voters were Latino; in the June primary, Latinos constituted an estimated 13 percent of the electorate. Current Latino voters are predominantly progressive, voting nearly 3-to-1 against both Proposition 226 and Proposition 227. Still, the significance of Latino votes could be much greater: Latinos make up 29.4 percent of the state's population.

While initial polls suggested strong Latino support for Proposition 227, a concerted effort to inform Latino voters of its impact on their children—particularly by the state's Spanish-language media—turned the tide within the community.

A similar reversal occurred with Proposition 226, which even union voters favored in early polls. Unions mobilized more than 20,000 members as active campaigners against Proposition 226. These activists, says Richard

Holober, the California Labor Federation's assistant research director, reached out to other union members at home and at work. As a result, anti-226 sentiment grew among working-class voters, who flocked to the polls, defeating the initiative by a 53.5 percent to 46.5 percent margin.

So, why did one referendum pass and

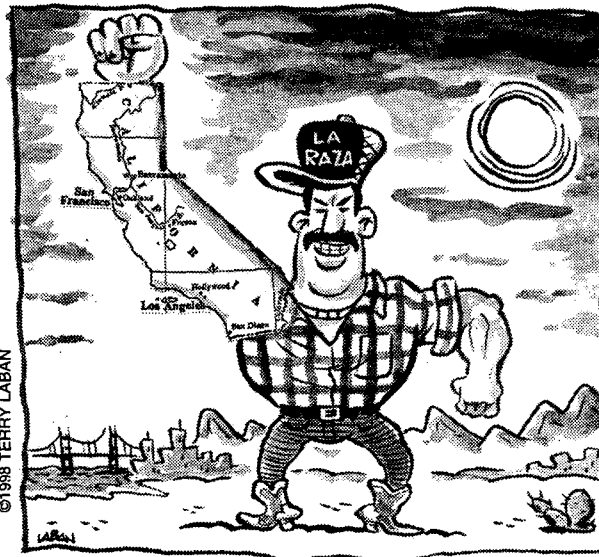
political activities. Although packaged as a drive for expanded rights of individual union members, the proposition was manufactured by right-wing activists and supported by out-of-state money. On the other hand, labor's argument that its political spending provides a counterweight to the political power of big business resonated with many voters.

Proposition 227, on the other hand, appealed to voters on several levels. First, it capitalized on a nasty vein of anti-immigrant xenophobia that runs deep in California politics. While not all supporters of Proposition 227 were anti-immigrant—a majority of Asian-American voters and perhaps one-third of Latino voters supported the initiative—it drew on the xenophobic sensibilities that were mobilized in support of recent anti-immigrant and anti-affirmative action referendums. Second, proponents sidestepped the racist tag by repeating misleading, early polling information that sug-

gested most Latinos supported the measure. Finally, the proposition offered a quick-fix response to what many voters perceived as a real problem: Rightly or wrongly, many Californians believe that bilingual education fails to teach immigrant children proper English.

While labor emerged as the biggest winner in the primary, it's the Latino vote that has generated the most long-term interest. With California's Latino population growing fast and its electoral participation climbing, activists and politicians are watching. "This changes the face of California politics," Holober says. "The Latino vote is a significant vote, it's a working-class vote, and it's a strong progressive vote." ■

James B. Goodno reports on California politics from Berkeley and Sacramento.



the other fail? Labor spent roughly \$23 million on radio and television advertising, getting its campaign off to a quick start, setting the tone for debate over Proposition 226 and reaching the general public. Activists opposing Proposition 227, however, were barely visible in the broadcast media. "We had the resources, they didn't," says Jose Moreno of Californians to Protect Employees Rights, the labor-backed group that led the media campaign against Proposition 226. "In California, because of the diversity of the state, you need to go on TV early and often. We were able to do that. They weren't."

Had it passed, Proposition 226 would have required unions to receive annual written permission from members before applying a portion of their dues to

mexico

Maquiladora Mayhem

BY DAVID BACON

Early on the morning of May 22, dozens of workers gathered on a narrow road facing an old industrial building, high on one of the mesas surrounding Tijuana, Mexico. An undercurrent of tension and anticipation filled the dusty street in front of the Han Young factory, as the workers awaited the beginning of the first legal strike by an independent union at a Mexican maquiladora.

From outside the plant, the would-be strikers could hear the boom and clang of machinery operated by three-dozen newly hired workers. Around 8 a.m., when their shift normally started, the regular workers filed into the factory to turn the machines off. The strikers demanded that everyone leave. Mexican labor law bars a company from continuing operations during a legal strike. Around the welding machines in the plant's dim, cavernous interior, the strikers confronted the new hires and the company's human relations director. Shouting and shoving matches broke out.

Outside, the strikers strung the traditional red and black banners that signal a strike across the entrances to the plant. As the day wore on, the new hires trickled out of the factory, complaining that production was impossible without the skilled labor of the regular workers. By evening, the plant was dark and deserted. For the next two weeks, Han Young strikers lived in the street outside the factory, day and night, parking their vehicles in front of its huge corrugated-iron doors. No one entered.

But on June 3, local authorities moved to crush the strike. More than 100 members of Tijuana's SWAT team, the "Special Forces," tore down strike banners at Han Young and burned them in the street. Then, they opened the doors to the plant and ushered in a con-



Voters line up to cast their ballots in a union election at Han Young.

©1998 DAVID BACON

tingent of strikebreakers. Arrest warrants were issued for Enrique Hernandez, organizer of the independent union of Han Young workers, and Jose Peñaflor, the union's attorney.

The strike marks the culmination of a year-long effort by workers to organize an independent union and win bargaining rights at Han Young, a contract plant where 100 employees weld truck chassis for the huge Hyundai manufacturing complex in Tijuana. Plant manager Pablo Kang says, "We pay higher wages than any other maquiladora in Tijuana." But workers complain the plant has a high accident rate, and that they can't live on its wages of 64 pesos (about \$8) a day.

The impact of the strike, which cost Han Young \$40,000 during its first week, could reach far beyond Tijuana's industrial zone. More than 2,700 maquiladoras line the U.S.-Mexico border, employing about a million workers—a fifth of the Mexican work force. The keys to the success of the maquiladoras have been their proximity to U.S. markets, the lowest wage rates in industrial Latin America and labor peace. The strike at Han Young could change that formula. "If we win, there are workers in hundreds of maquiladoras who will try to form their own unions, so they can get better wages and

conditions," Hernandez says. "That challenges government policy, which relies on maintaining low wages as an attraction for foreign investment. So, the government, its affiliated unions and the employers' association have all allied themselves against us."

When workers demanded that the company recognize their independent union last June, Han Young's owner, Young Lee, told them that the plant

already had a contract with a union closely allied to Tijuana's political establishment. Such "protection contracts," arrangements of mutual convenience between the government, government-affiliated unions and foreign owners, prevail at thousands of plants and factories across Mexico. "The government basically uses these labor federations to get votes during elections," says Jesús Campos Linas, a leading Mexican labor lawyer. "Companies make hefty regular payments to union leaders under these contracts, and in return get labor peace."

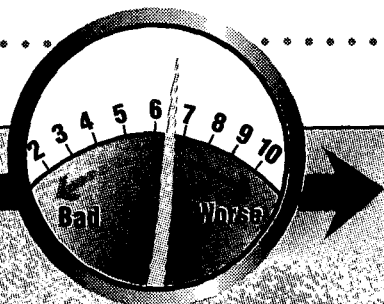
Last summer, Han Young workers formally petitioned Tijuana's labor board for the right to form their own union and joined one of Mexico's national independent unions, the Union of Workers in the Metal, Steel, Iron and Connected Industries. In October, they won an election, though it was marred by accusations that the company brought in ineligible voters. The Tijuana labor board refused to recognize the election results, but further work stoppages, a hunger strike and leafleting at Hyundai car dealerships in the United States and Canada forced a second election in December with the same result. The labor board finally granted recognition and bargaining rights to the independent

Continued on page 6

appall-o-meter

BY DAVID FUTRELLE

The In These Times Index of Indecencies



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Bad Taste 8.7

Advertisers have already brought John Wayne, Fred Astaire and other celebrities back from the grave to sell everything from beer to vacuum cleaners. An ad campaign in Thailand for a brand of potato chips adds a slightly less savory celebrity to the list: Adolf Hitler. According to Reuters, a new ad on Thai television "shows Hitler in military uniform tasting the [chips] and giving the Nazi salute. The ad ends with Hitler in front of a Nazi flag as the swastika changes into the logo of the [chip] brand." Though officials at the

Israeli embassy in Bangkok called the ads "disgusting," the advertising agency responsible for the spots says they were meant in good fun. "We have brought up the concept that Hitler or anyone who tastes the potato chips will go crazy for it," explains a spokesman for Leo Burnett.

Game Wardens 7.1

Until now, it has been hard to use the expressions "fun for the whole family" and "Tennessee Department of Corrections" in the same sentence. That may change now that the Tennessee Department of Corrections' "Kids Fun Zone" has opened up on the Web. The site features an assortment of word games and trivia questions that'll keep the littlest perps busy for hours. There's a word game, in which youngsters are encouraged to unscramble words like "prison" and "parole." There are trivia questions ("An inmate may reduce the amount of time he/she must serve by: a) keeping his/her cell clean b) earning credits for good behavior c) escaping"). And there's the Frequently Asked Questions page,

where curious youngsters can learn an assortment of fun facts about capital punishment and be gently reassured that kids don't normally get electrocuted—no matter how naughty they are.

Oysters, Shmoysters 5.4

Though the drug isn't for sale yet in Italy, aspiring entrepreneurs there are capitalizing on the Viagra craze. One bar in Genoa, Reuters reports, is marketing bright blue Viagra ice cream. In the small town of Cremona, "a grocer is selling a soft 'Viagra' cheese, which he says is perfect with pasta or rice." ■

Stunned by a stupid statement?

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Continued from page 5

union, but Han Young still refused to bargain, claiming that another government-affiliated union had asserted jurisdiction over the plant.

Then, on May 22, the Han Young workers went on strike. From the very beginning, the city's political establishment mobilized to discredit the strikers. The labor board staged yet another election on May 27, trying to end the work stoppage. This time, 52 workers voted to continue the strike and 64 voted against it—a total of 116 votes, though Hernandez says there were never that many workers at the factory. He alleges that most of those voting against the strike were hired after the union gave its strike notice, or never worked at the plant at all. "They were recruiting voters at the flea market the day before the election," he says.

Two days later, the board held yet another election in front of the plant. This time the vote swung back in favor

of the independent union, 74 to 65. Still, no one was asked to provide proof of employment. Nevertheless, the board invalidated the results, saying strike flags were put up 15 minutes too early. It then took out full-page advertisements in Tijuana newspapers to announce its decision. In return for substantial payments for the ads, the papers agreed not to carry further news of the strike.

The irregularities proved to be too much for federal Judge Maria Lourdes Villagomez Guillon. Hours after the voting concluded, Villagomez suspended all of the board's actions against the strike and the independent union, and scheduled a hearing for June 18 to resolve the conflict.

Local authorities refused to wait. Despite their actions to reopen the plant, the 35 strikebreakers produced only five truck chassis in the first four days of work. The regular work force makes around 20 chassis a day. Meanwhile, the

strikers organized daily demonstrations and marches throughout the city.

More than 500 labor, human rights and immigrant rights leaders in Mexico and the United States have signed a letter to Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo, asking him to overrule the actions of the Tijuana authorities. In Washington, House Minority Whip David Bonior (D-Mich.) has criticized Han Young and Mexican officials for engaging in a "systematic effort to deny Han Young workers their right to an independent union through harassment, intimidation and fraud." And spokesman Bob Zachariasiewicz says the Labor Department is "monitoring developments very closely."

"The protection which the state government is giving to foreign maquiladora investors is very obvious," wrote Hernandez and five members of the Han Young strike committee in an appeal for international solidarity. "In Baja California, labor justice is a dead letter." ■

Media Critic

Same Old Welfare Stories

BY NEIL DEMAUSE

When it comes to the media, sometimes you can't win for losing. Take "welfare reform," the misbegotten tangle of time limits, family caps, unpaid workfare and public/private bureaucracy that burst into national prominence in 1995.

Ever since, coverage of the issue has been limited to two types of boilerplate stories. In one, various Beltway politicians, think-tank pundits, and other human flotsam of the sort that clog up the Jim Lehrer's *NewsHour* hash away at how to change the system, which usually comes down to the questions of who should be cut off, and how fast.

In the other, a reporter visits a handful of people receiving welfare, who provide a human-interest cameo on the difficulties of dragging themselves out of the gutter. (In one typical segment, on ABC's *World News Tonight*, reporter Beth Nissen asked a group of former welfare recipients, "Have they taken away all your excuses, if you had any excuses?") Reporters rarely ask the poor for their thoughts on welfare policy—or, if they do, those views are turned upside-down. On the eve of passage of the 1996 welfare law, the *Los Angeles Times* interviewed four women receiving aid, found three opposed to the new law, and then printed its story under the headline "Many Recipients Regard Reforms as Painful, Necessary."

Advocates for the poor and the poor themselves long have been asking the news media to look past the hype to the actual impact of welfare reform. So when the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, the twin pillars of establishment wisdom, ran simultaneous front-page stories on the failures of reform on March 22, it was cause for some hope.

The *Times* piece reported on a state study that found that more than two-thirds of New Yorkers leaving the welfare rolls were failing to find jobs, despite the

state's "welfare-to-work" goals. The *Post*, meanwhile, offered a glimpse into why people were ditching welfare despite having no other means of income: Federal statistics showed that 38 percent of those leaving welfare nationwide had been "sanctioned"—kicked off for infractions such as missing an appointment or failing to fill out a form properly.

Both stories relied on official data, not independent investigative reporting, and if the government could be counted on to report on its own successes and failures, that would be fine. But neither local nor national agencies have made much effort to track the effects of welfare reform. The most ambitious reformers, Wisconsin and New York City, report the least data, complaining of the high costs of collecting information—but also figuring that what the public doesn't know won't hurt them.

To its credit, the *Times* responded to this stonewalling with a scathing (for the *Times*) series in May that recapped the March findings and described a workfare detail where the supervisor repeatedly dumped the same pile of leaves on the ground to be swept again and again. But such stories have been rare. By the time President Clinton again declared welfare reform a complete success on May 27, even the *Times* headlined its story, "900,000 More Leave the Welfare Rolls," without once speculating on where they had gone.

There are ways to get behind the official numbers. New York City poverty

researcher Anna Lou DeHavenon says a single visit to the city's housing emergency assistance unit would reveal increasing hunger and homelessness in the wake of the new laws—even as official figures on shelter occupancy drop because the city has made it harder to apply for housing aid.

That sort of reporting requires journalists to work harder. "It's really a full-time beat," says Rob Polner, a former welfare reporter for *Newsday*, "because it requires fairly detailed understanding of the bureaucracy. It requires time to go out into the field and get to know people on welfare, to understand the various reasons people are on welfare and to know something about the history of the welfare system." Unfortunately, most papers just kick welfare stories to the nearest available reporter.

Occasionally, of course, someone breaks the pattern. *Dateline NBC* recently ran a segment that followed four women as they navigated Wisconsin's "W-2" workfare system. Reporter Maria Shriver dutifully recounted the circumstances of their ending up on welfare, their resentment at being sanctioned, their hope for meaningful work and their varied thoughts on W-2, without intercutting any politicians or pundits to tell us what to think of their plight.

Then, Shriver hauled in the ex-husband of one woman and the conservative Republican father of another to disparage their wayward lifestyles. Old habits die hard. ■

online

- A 25-year-old journalist who wrote brilliant "you-are-there" leads and uncovered a series of strange cults of personality dedicated to American political figures, Stephen Glass was once *The New Republic's* star reporter. But in May, the magazine fired him after discovering that he had fabricated most of his articles. Toronto-based writer Rick McGinnis has put together the comprehensive Web site on the scandal, "A Tissue of Lies: The Stephen J. Glass Index" (<http://www.interlog.com/~rmcginn/Glassindex.htm>). The page contains a list of Glass' published work and links to numerous articles about his dismissal. Unfortunately, it has few links to Glass' own work: *TNR* has deleted most of Glass' stories from its own site (<http://www.thenewrepublic.com>).

Visit in *These Times* online at <http://www.inthesetimes.com>

The Case for ProPAC

BY AIMIE GRESHAM AND NATHAN NEWMAN

I Imagine the horror of discovering that your donation to the Democrats helped candidates like Louisiana's Billy Tauzin, Oklahoma's Wes Watkins, Georgia's Nathan Deal, Texas' Greg Laughlin and Mississippi's Mike Parker—all Republicans—get elected to the House of Representatives.

But that's exactly what happened. Although each of these congressmen ran as a Democrat, they all defected to Newt's team shortly after taking office. This group is the starkest example of the infuriating way progressives distribute their limited campaign resources. If there's one area where we should be conservative, it's dispensing money to candidates whose loyalties are suspect and whose politics are questionable.

Progressives aren't going to beat conservatives—either the Republican or Democratic variety—at the money game any time soon, but we can use our money more wisely. So, a group of progressives are establishing a new political action committee called ProPAC.

Progressives cannot afford to squander money, and yet, many of us give to the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) in the hopes of gaining a Democratic majority. Instead, we have ended up with a pro-business Democratic Party that shares power with a centrist president and a right-wing House and Senate. Contributions to ProPAC will fund only the most progressive incumbents and challengers, ensuring that our limited resources are not funneled to "New Democrats" or candidates itching to jump ship.

We need to learn some lessons from the far right. None other than Newt Gingrich and his political action committee, GOPAC, should be our model. In the early '80s, Gingrich and a fringe group of conservative backbenchers were laughed at for being out of step with their congressional colleagues. Today, they're still the butt of a lot of jokes—but they wield the gavel. Similarly, the multimillion-dollar PACs of the Christian right have filled their political coffers with many small donations from their supporters across the country. Through organizations like ProPAC, progressives can develop a similar strategy, relying on grass-roots support for our candidates.

For incumbents, the benchmark for ProPAC support should be, at the least, membership in the Congressional Progressive Caucus. The hidden story in recent elections is that while Republicans have gained seats at the expense of conservative

Democrats, progressives have held their ground. In 1996, all 51 Members of the Progressive Caucus who ran for re-election won. In addition, the Caucus added seven new members in the 105th Congress, including six freshmen.

Who are these Progressive Caucus members? Founded in 1991 by several Representatives, including Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) and peace champion Ron Dellums (D-Calif.), the 58-member Caucus now includes Black Caucus chairwoman Maxine Waters (D-Calif.), Asian-American Caucus chairwoman Patsy Mink (D-Hawaii) and Hispanic Caucus chairman Xavier Becerra (D-Calif.). Washington, D.C., delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton, co-chairwoman of the Women's Caucus, is a member, as are Jesse Jackson Jr. (D-Ill.), New Party member Danny K. Davis (D-Ill.) and Barney Frank (D-Mass.), the only openly gay House Democrat. Also on the list are Major Owens (D-N.Y.) and John Conyers (D-Mich.), both members of the Democratic Socialists of America, as well as Civil rights hero John Lewis (D-Ga.). They join Minority Whip David Bonior (D-Mich.), the No. 2 Democrat in the House leadership. These people are exactly the type of leaders needed to move the country forward. While caucus members do not vote as a bloc, they have challenged the conservative majority, leading

the fight for single-payer health care and defeating fast track.

Whom else will ProPAC support? Candidates with a proven commitment to economic justice, universal health care, education, labor, affirmative action, environmental protection, and cutting wasteful military spending and corporate welfare. This means working with the women's movement, labor, environmental groups, the New Party and other organizations to seek out valuable challengers. The AFL-CIO has vowed to elect 2,000 union members to office by 2000, and the National Organization for Women and other groups have similar goals. They need our help.

In the absence of substantive campaign finance reform, we have no choice but to use the current playing field. It's not enough simply to elect Democrats—we can leave that to the DCCC. But we will not expand the ranks of House progressives without a significant independent funding source. This is why we need ProPAC. ■

Aimie Gresham and Nathan Newman are members of the ProPAC Organizing Committee (propac@ix.netcom.com).

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Rockefeller's Legacy

BY JUAN GONZALEZ

T

he women, maybe 200 in all, waited in small groups. They carried bulky old pockethooks and frayed overnight bags stuffed with food and water and blankets for the long ride upstate. Several had sleepy children in tow.

It was 9 p.m. on a Saturday in May at Columbus Circle in midtown Manhattan, where the Operation Prison Gap buses pick up weekend passengers headed for places like Attica, Auburn, Elmira and Ogdensburg. "Get down off that bench before you fall," Violet Vargas barks at her 4-year-old daughter. "Her father's in Riverview," Vargas says. "Five-to-15 for drugs. I try to see him every weekend."

The bus ride to Riverview Correctional Facility takes 10 hours one way. It costs \$45 round trip. "We get there in the morning and my daughter gets to spend most of the day with him," Vargas says. "The guards at Riverview are nice. It's a big sacrifice for me, but he's been a good father."

A few feet away, Anthony Papa passes out leaflets to the waiting women. "Is your man in jail for drugs?" Papa asks them. "Fill out this sheet. We've got to change these Rockefeller Drug Laws."

Papa is practically a Ph.D. on the Rockefeller laws. In 1985, he was a successful middle-class businessman. He owned an auto-repair and radio business in the Bronx. He was married with a family and had never been in trouble with the law. Every week, he played in a bowling league in Yonkers.

A member of his team turned out to be a drug dealer who distributed cocaine at bowling alleys across suburban Westchester County. One day, the guy asked if Papa wanted to make some easy money. He offered him \$500 to deliver an envelope of cocaine to the town of Mt. Vernon. Papa foolishly agreed. The courier who gave him the envelope turned out to be an undercover police informant. When Papa delivered the 4.5 ounces of coke, 20 cops were waiting.

The guys who set up Papa copped a plea. Papa went to trial and was convicted on two counts, sales and possession. The judge gave him a break: He sentenced Papa to one 15-to-life sentence instead of two. Papa served 12 years in Sing Sing. In prison, he earned two bachelor's degrees and a master's from the New York Theological Seminary. He became a recognized artist, even exhibiting some paintings at the Whitney Museum.

He would still be in jail if Gov. George Pataki hadn't grant-

ed him clemency in December 1996. Pataki, following the tradition of past governors, pardons a handful of Rockefeller Law inmates every Christmas. Papa now works as a legal assistant at a patent and trademark law firm. In his spare time he is trying to build a movement to restore some sanity to our justice system.

When the New York drug laws were enacted 25 years ago by then Gov. Nelson Rockefeller, they were the toughest in the nation. Even today, a first-time offender convicted of selling 2 ounces of cocaine in New York gets a mandatory sentence of 15 years-to-life. Drug offenses are treated as harshly as murder, rape and kidnapping.

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As a result, the jails have exploded with drug felons. In 1973, there were 12,500 inmates in the New York state prison system. Today there are more than 69,000. In 1980, 57 percent of prison inmates were there for violent crimes, only 11 percent for drugs. By last year, those rates were almost reversed. "The Rockefeller laws were the prototype," says Robert Gangi, director of the Correctional Association of New York. "During the '70s and '80s, virtually every state in the nation adopted mandatory sentencing laws based on the Rockefeller model for drug and repeat

felony convictions."

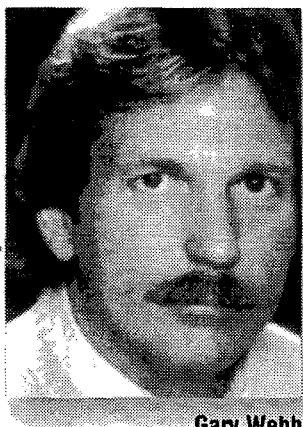
Pataki and many other law-and-order Republicans admit the mandatory drug sentences haven't worked, but they don't dare look soft on crime by overhauling them. Some, like Warren Anderson, who was Republican majority leader in the state Senate when Rockefeller pushed through the original laws, are now campaigning quietly to restore some discretion to judges. Other groups, like the Correctional Association of New York and the William Moses Kunstler Fund for Racial Justice, are seeking total repeal of the laws, a far less likely possibility.

Rockefeller has been dead a long time. But thousands are living out his legacy behind bars. Children of Rockefeller law convicts are left to grow up without their fathers or mothers whose sentences are obscene compared to some violent felons. Robert Chambers, for instance, who strangled Jennifer Levin in Central Park a decade ago, got five-to-15 years. Joel Steinberg got eight-to-25 for the cocaine-induced killing of his daughter Lisa. Wilfred Letlow, who fatally stabbed his wife 92 times in their Queens home, was sentenced to eight-to-25 years for manslaughter.

But sell 4 ounces of cocaine, and you'll get 15-to-life. ■

“This matter, if true, would be classified.”

Gary Webb's *Dark Alliance*



Gary Webb

In August 1996, the San Jose Mercury News published a three-part series by investigative reporter Gary Webb, revealing that a Bay Area drug ring, which sold tons of cocaine to Los Angeles street gangs, funneled its profits into the CIA-backed Nicaraguan contra army. Webb argued that the drug network opened a pipeline between Colombia's cocaine

cartels and the black neighborhoods of Los Angeles, and he raised questions about whether the drug dealing took place with the CIA's knowledge and whether the agency looked the other way as the crack epidemic ravaged America's inner cities.

At first, the national press ignored the "Dark Alliance" series. But, as the story circulated widely via the Internet and public outrage began to build, particularly in the African-American community, the Washington Post took the lead in trying to discredit Webb. In October 1996, Robert Suro and Walter Pincus, the Post's national security expert, wrote a scathing critique that acknowledged the basic facts of the story but dismissed Webb's thesis that contra cocaine dealing fueled the crack epidemic. While explaining that "the CIA knew about some of these activities and did little or nothing to stop them," the Post reporters (and other critics who followed), ignored evidence that the CIA interfered with attempts by law enforcement officials to curtail the contra drug operations. Nor did they mention that in the 1996 trial of Ricky Ross, a Los Angeles

crack dealer, government prosecutors obtained a court order to prevent defense lawyers from questioning former contra drug smuggler Danilo Blandón about his ties to the CIA.

Pincus and Suro also attacked Webb's journalistic ethics, particularly his role in providing Ross' defense attorney, Alan Fenster, with questions to ask Blandón during the trial. In the following excerpt from Webb's new book, *Dark Alliance: The CIA, the Contras, and the Crack Cocaine Explosion* (Seven Stories Press), he tells his side of the story.

A few days before the trial of "Freeway" Ricky Ross, one of the biggest crack dealers in Los Angeles, was scheduled to begin, Jesse Katz of the *Los Angeles Times* called me at home, where I had holed up to sketch out the first drafts of the "Dark Alliance" series. Though we worked for competing newspapers, Katz had been a helpful and encouraging source during the months I'd spent wending my way through the rise and fall of Ross' crack-dealing career.

"Look," said Katz. "Alan Fenster filed a motion asking that the case be dismissed because the prosecutors were illegally withholding information from the defense. He filed an affidavit from a private investigator who said he'd spoken to you, and it says you have information that Danilo Blandón was involved in the Iran-Contra scandal. So what I'm asking is: Is it true?"

I had been double-crossed. A private eye hired by Ross' lawyer had come by my house looking for information on Blandón, a cocaine-dealer who founded the Los Angeles chapter of the *contras*, but I told him very little. He then pulled out a copy of a DEA report Fenster had gotten through discovery, which showed that Blandón, who later became a

DEA informant, clearly knew the cocaine he was selling to Ross was being turned into crack by the Crips and Bloods. It was an important bit of documentation for my story.

He would give me this, he said, if I would simply show him something about Blandón that the government hadn't turned over, so the defense could honestly say there was information being hidden from them. I wouldn't be identified. They didn't need a copy. They just needed to know that such documents existed.

From covering the case, I knew the federal attorneys had been withholding reams of evidence about Blandón's sordid background and his association with the *contras*. If Fenster could catch them at it, I thought, maybe the court would order the Justice Department to make all the documents public, which would give me access to records I wanted to see.

I thought it over and agreed to show the PI one of the FBI reports I'd gotten from the Iran-Contra files at the National Archives. The next thing I knew, Fenster had named me and exposed the *Mercury News*' investigation in his motion, and now the *Los Angeles Times* was onto it.

I should have known better. For weeks Ross and Fenster had been badgering me to publish the series before the trial started, figuring that the publicity might give the Justice Department second thoughts about pursuing the case. But after sitting down and roughing out an outline, I saw there was still too much I didn't know—too many unanswered questions. Dawn Garcia, my editor at the *Mercury News*, and I agreed that if Blandón, who was ignoring our interview requests, was going to testify, the story would benefit by waiting.

Right after I hung up, Fenster called. The Justice Department, he said, had just filed a motion to prevent him from questioning Blandón about the CIA.

"Why? Have you gotten some information about that?"

"No, but apparently they think I have," he said. "You should read this thing—it's amazing."

The motion, written by Assistant U.S. Attorney L.J. O'Neale, was as bizarre as Fenster had claimed: "The United States believes that at least one defendant will attempt to assert to the effect that the informant in this case sold cocaine to raise money for the Nicaraguan *contras* and that he did so in conjunction with, or for, the Central Intelligence Agency."

O'Neale said the government was sure the information was false, but the motion made it clear that he wasn't sure at all. "This matter, if true, would be classified," O'Neale had written, "if false should not be allowed. The only purpose for asking questions in this regard would be as a clumsy attempt to bullyrag the United States into foregoing prosecution."

If the CIA was involved in drug sales, it would be classified? That was a good one. The whole legal basis for

O'Neale's motion was tangential; Fenster hadn't filed the required notice to alert the government that he might reveal classified information at trial. Therefore, O'Neale wanted a court order "prohibiting any defendant from making any reference in this case to the United States Central Intelligence Agency, or to any alleged activity of that agency."

Fenster said there was a hearing on the government's motion scheduled for the next day, and I jumped on a plane to San Diego. I couldn't wait to hear the U.S. Justice Department stand up in court and say that information about CIA involvement in drug trafficking was classified.

When I got there, I noticed that I was the only spectator in the courtroom. Good. I took a seat in the front row.

Shortly before the hearing began, I heard the courtroom door open behind me. It was Jesse Katz, with a big smile on his face. The *Times* had flown him in from his office in Houston just to be here, he told me.

I groaned silently. There goes the ball game. All the connections between Blandón, the *contras*, the CIA, and Ricky Ross were going to come out in public, and the *Los Angeles Times* was going to beat me on my own goddamned story. Nine months worth of work down the crapper. I wanted to tear my hair out.

From a side door, prosecutor O'Neale strutted in, carrying a boxload of

records, followed by DEA agents Chuck

Jones and Judy Gustafson. O'Neale looked at me; he looked at Jesse Katz; and then he blanched. When federal Judge Marilyn Huff called the courtroom to order, O'Neale immediately asked to approach the bench.

He and Fenster huddled with the judge, whispering. Occasionally O'Neale would gesture to Katz and me. The huddle broke up, and Fenster walked back to the defense table, shaking his head.

"I have reviewed the government's request that the court seal, uh, certain portions," Huff announced cryptically. "You may be heard at sidebar, Mr. O'Neale. And defense counsel." The lawyers again trooped up to the judge's bench and began an animated, whispered conversation.

Katz and I strained to catch bits and pieces. I heard "CIA" several times—"murders in Mexico"; "money from the U.S. government"; "*contras*."

O'Neale looked at us and turned back to the huddle. He warned defense attorney Juanita Brooks to lower her voice. "The reporters that Mr. Fenster has brought to court today are listening very carefully," he told her.



As with most federal court proceedings, the conversation was recorded and I later obtained a copy of the tape. Brooks, in a low whisper, told the judge that she was very disturbed O'Neale had hidden from the defense the fact that "Blandón was a member of an organization responsible for numerous murders in Mexico." O'Neale denied it. While he admitted that Blandón had gotten into the drug business by selling cocaine for the *contras*, he said there was "absolutely no connection between Blandón and the CIA."

"He was never authorized to do that by a CIA agent?" Huff whispered.

"Well, look," O'Neale hissed, "that's something I'm not even sure I can say 'yes' or 'no' to because that comes within the realm of—look, I have no reason to believe he had any contact with the CIA and I would defy counsel to come up with any kind of credible information that he had a connection to the CIA."

Fenster, struggling to keep his voice low, whispered that the reason he didn't have any information was because the government had refused to turn over "pages and pages of records ... that I know for a fact exist!" O'Neale denied there was anything significant in the files.

Ten minutes turned into 20 minutes, and it dawned on us that the entire motion was going to be heard in whispers at the judge's bench. I'd never seen anything like it, and I'd covered many federal trials. Katz was beside himself.

"They can't do this!" he insisted. "How can they do this, just because we're here?" I told him I didn't know and commiserated with him, but inside I was exulting. Thank God for this one instance of government secrecy.

The next morning I ran down to the hotel lobby and grabbed a copy of the *Times*. Katz's story had run, focusing on the relationship between Ross and Blandón. Blandón, Katz wrote, had "taught [Ross] the trade" and oversaw his rise "through the ranks of the Los Angeles underworld, becoming the first crack-dealing millionaire on South Central's streets." The story hinted at "new and surprising dimensions" involving Blandón and some alleged "ties to U.S. intelligence sources," but never said what they were. There was no mention of the *contras*. Whew.

When the trial got under way that day, once again I was the only reporter in the courtroom. Katz had apparently gone back to Houston, and no one from the *Times* had been assigned to cover the trial.

Once again, Fenster demanded that the government turn over its records about Blandón, arguing that it was prejudic-

ing Ross' chance to fairly cross-examine his chief accuser. O'Neale calmly assured Fenster that he'd gotten everything the government felt he was entitled to know about Blandón—his prior arrest record and the fact that he'd been paid \$40,000 for setting Ross up. What else could he possibly want?

"I don't think my client's life should be up to the government to determine what he should be allowed to know about Blandón's credibility," Fenster told Huff indignantly.

"The system we've set up has the government review all the information in its files to decide whether it complies with the law," Judge Huff replied blandly. "Mr. O'Neale, in good faith, has made that review."

"So we're supposed to trust the government to tell us if the CIA was involved?" Fenster asked. "They say that there's nothing that exists. I don't know if they really know that. I mean, I don't know if they've checked with the CIA to determine if such matters exist."

To my surprise, O'Neale admitted that he hadn't checked. Even though he'd personally assured the court several times that the government had no grounds to believe Blandón had any CIA ties, he'd never actually gotten around to asking the CIA. There was no need, he insisted: "One hopes that whatever the CIA does in the best interests of this country, that it will be concealed from view. And one hopes that if they do something that is in the worst interest or in violation of the laws of this country, that it will come to light. But, no, I haven't checked with the CIA. I've had no cause to check with the CIA."

Huff ignored O'Neale's stunning admission and told Fenster that he should trust her to do the right thing. Huff denied Fenster's motions.

Blandón, wearing tinted aviator glasses and a dark suit, made his grand entry the next day, shielded by U.S. marshals. They led him to a row of chairs directly in front of me, and he sat down stiffly. After chasing him around California and Central America for nine months, seeing him now for the first time sitting only a foot away gave me a strange feeling. Blandón in the flesh.

I leaned over the rail and tapped Blandón on the shoulder with one of my business cards. "I've been calling all over for you," I said. "I'm sure your mother-in-law is tired of hearing my voice."

He turned and smiled. "I apologize." I told him I needed to talk to him. He shook his head. "I can't, because of all of this."

"Okay then. How about after the trial?"

"No. Personally, if it was up to me, I would say yes. But they won't let me," he said, nodding toward the prosecution table.

It was all out in the open now. The contras had sold drugs to American citizens—mainly black Americans—and the CIA was on the hook for it.

"The prosecutor won't let you talk?"

He shook his head. "DEA."

"So you won't talk to me ever, is that it?"

He nodded and shrugged. "Sorry. What can I do?"

O'Neale called Blandón up to the stand and led him carefully through his testimony. He touched on the *contras*, admitting that Norwin Meneses had recruited him to sell cocaine for them. Meneses, a drug kingpin believed to be the Cali Cartel's representative in Nicaragua, worked for the *contras* as a recruiter, arms supplier and benefactor during the entire war. Blandón said he'd stopped selling *contra* cocaine in 1983, when he split from Meneses and started keeping the money for himself.

That was odd, I thought, flipping through my notebook. When I'd interviewed O'Neale in November, the prosecutor had said that occurred in 1986. The day before the trial, I noticed, O'Neale had said in court that it happened in 1984. By the end of the day, though, Blandón would be insisting that he'd actually quit in 1982—long before he'd met Ross, he said. O'Neale kept going over and over that point.

Then it dawned on me. They were trying to open a window, hoping to put a decent interval between the time Blandón was selling dope for the CIA's army and the time he started selling dope to the L.A. gangs. They were trying to break the chain linking the *contra*'s cocaine to the Crips and Bloods.

There was one big problem with that tactic. It didn't jibe with all the other facts. Ross said he'd been dealing with Blandón and his minions since 1981. Second, there were government documents out there strongly suggesting that Blandón's testimony was false—records that said he was selling cocaine for Meneses and the *contras* all the way through 1986. Of course, Fenster didn't have those records, since the government had refused to turn them over. (Additional records surfaced after the trial was over and Blandón eventually admitted to the Senate Intelligence Committee and the CIA Inspector General that his *contra* contributions continued through 1985.)

During the noon break, Fenster approached me in the hallway outside the courtroom. "Can we have lunch?" he asked. We walked to the restaurant of the Doubletree Hotel at Horton Plaza, near the courthouse. Fenster sipped an iced tea and asked me what I thought about Blandón's testimony.

"You got the *Highlights for Children* version of his cocaine dealings with the *contras*," I said.

"That's what I thought. How am I supposed to cross-examine this guy? I don't even know what to ask!" He laughed ruefully. "Isn't this just crazy? I mean, here I am, defending a man against a life sentence, and I've got to ask some reporter if the prosecution testimony is accurate. That's justice for you. You know more about the bastard than I do."

"Not as much as I'd like, unfortunately. And he just told me he's never going to talk to me."

A light came on. Wait a minute. What law said I needed to do my interview directly? The solution was right here in front of me. Blandón was up there on a witness stand, under oath, in front of a federal judge. He was a sitting duck. I'd never get a better shot at him than this. For that matter, I doubted he'd ever be seen in public again. It was now or never.

"Tell you what," I said. "I need to make sure this is okay

first, but what would you think about me giving you some questions to ask him?"

"You read my mind," Fenster said, getting a notepad out of his briefcase. I excused myself and went to a pay phone. Miraculously, Dawn was at her desk, and I explained the situation. There was no other way, I told her. Could she see any possible harm in giving Fenster some questions about the *contras*? "I think it's a great idea," she said. "I wish we could do all of our interviews under oath."

When Fenster began his cross-examination the next day, he came right at Blandón, grilling him about his family's connections to the Somoza dictatorship. "There were certain families in Nicaragua that were part of the ruling cartel of Nicaragua, is that correct?"

O'Neale turned and glared at me and then jumped to his feet.

"Excuse me, I have an objection!" he shouted. "Relevance! Inflammatory language! What is the—the—relevance to—what the—"

He was overruled, and Fenster pushed on, boring in on Blandón's unbelievable claim that he quit dealing cocaine for the *contras* when the CIA came through with \$19 million in aid.

"Nineteen-million dollars isn't even a drop in the bucket when you run that kind of operation, isn't that correct?"

"I didn't ... I didn't know we received the \$19 million," Blandón confessed. "I cannot tell you."

"Is it your testimony that you decided to keep the profits from the drug dealing because the *contra* organization had enough money to fund their own war? Is that your testimony?"

"No sir. Let me explain one thing. When we meet—when we raise money for the *contra* revolution, we received orders from the—" He paused and looked at O'Neale. O'Neale stared at him. "From another people." Because of the order prohibiting CIA testimony, Fenster was unable to pursue that line of inquiry.

He quizzed Blandón about his meetings in Honduras with CIA agent Enrique Bermúdez, the *contra* organization in Miami, and his connections to the Meneses family. The Nicaraguan looked helplessly at O'Neale, and several times the prosecutor leaped up to object, spluttering that Fenster's questions were irrelevant and prejudicial. Most of the time he was overruled. Blandón was like a deer caught in the headlights. Every so often DEA agent Jones would turn and give me the evil eye.

He knew where this shit was coming from. So did O'Neale, who actually complained about it to the judge. They'd done their best to keep it bottled up, and it had spilled out anyway. I walked back to my hotel room that night 10 feet off the ground.

It was all out in the open now. The *contras* had sold drugs to American citizens—mainly black Americans—and the CIA was on the hook for it: A CIA agent had given the god-damned order. I thought back to all the lies that had been told about the *contras*' innocence. All the bullshit that had been piled on the reporters, cops and congressional investigators who'd tried to do an honest job and bring light into the dark swamp where covert operators and criminals colluded. There was no denying it any more.

Now I was ready to write. ■

BLACK RADICALISM

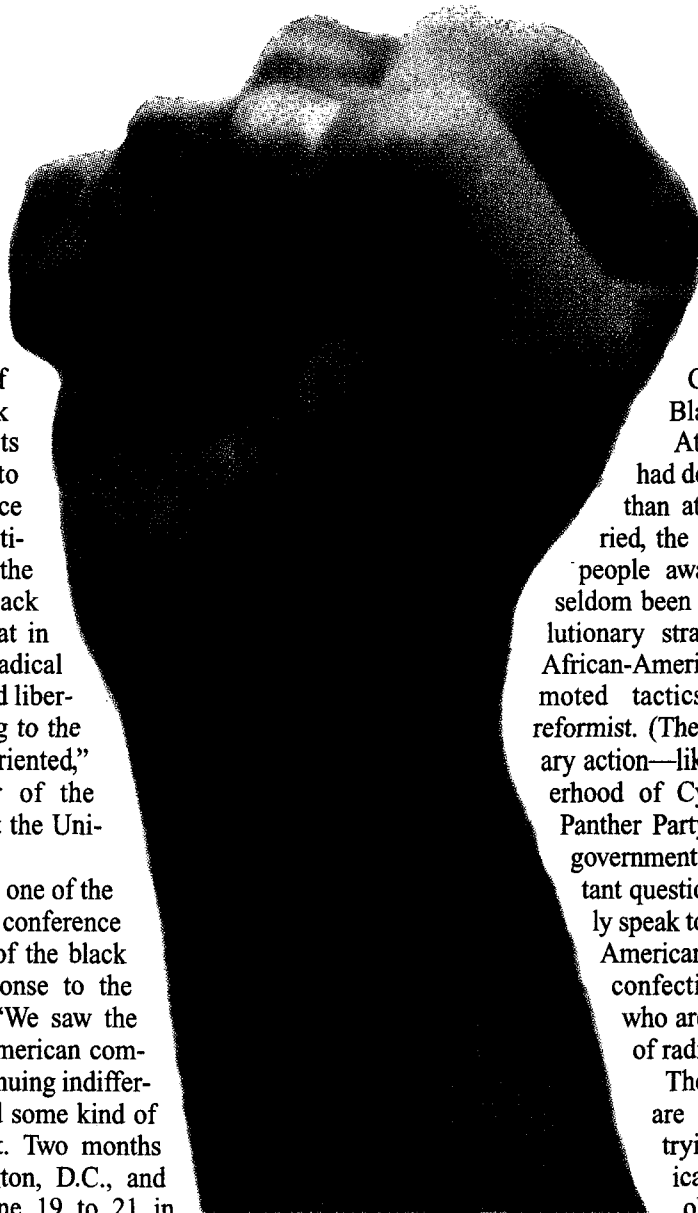
Where Do We Go from Here?

Developing a left politics for African-Americans

By Salim Muwakkil

A year ago, a group of progressive black academics, activists and artists met in Chicago to address the growing insignificance of the black left in the current political climate. They decided that the time is ripe for a revival of the black radical tradition. "We realized that in the absence of a strong black radical perspective, many progressives and liberals have found themselves moving to the right or becoming completely disoriented," says Abdul Alkalimat, director of the department of Africana Studies at the University of Toledo.

The group (full disclosure: I was one of the organizers) decided to convene a conference to assemble the varied segments of the black left and craft an organized response to the rightward drift of U.S. politics. "We saw the deepening crisis of the African-American community and the government's continuing indifference, and we knew that demanded some kind of radical response," says Alkalimat. Two months later, the group met in Washington, D.C., and scheduled a conference from June 19 to 21 in



Chicago. They called it the Black Radical Congress.

At the time, many participants had doubts about the name; rather than attracting interest, they worried, the "radical" label would scare people away. Black Americans have seldom been attracted to radical or revolutionary strategies. Historically, major African-American organizations have promoted tactics that are best termed reformist. (The few that urged revolutionary action—like the African Blood Brotherhood of Cyril Briggs and the Black Panther Party—were neutralized by the government.) That reality raises important questions: Does the congress really speak to the political needs of black Americans? Or is it just an abstract confection of black intellectuals who are enchanted by the romance of radicalism?

The organizers, most of whom are academics, say that they are trying to reclaim the black radical tradition from historical obscurity. Manning Marable,

director of the Institute for Research in African-American Studies at Columbia University, argues that the black radical tradition is a noble one, and should be celebrated, not shunned. "We embrace the tradition of historic figures like the militant abolitionists Henry Highland Garnet, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman and Martin Delany; crusading journalists like Ida B. Wells Barnett and William Monroe Trotter; and organizers like A. Philip Randolph and Cyril Briggs," Marable says. Paul Robeson, W.E.B. Du Bois, Malcolm X, Huey Newton and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. all make the congress' pantheon of radicals as well.

"The realization of genuine democracy in the United States requires radical solutions," begins the group's manifesto, titled "A Black Freedom Agenda for the Twenty First Century." "Radicalism," the document continues, "means to get at the root of real problems, seeking effective solutions. What we want is an end to the exploitation of capitalism, white racism and every manifestation of human oppression, a revolutionary transformation of the state and society, and the realization of humanistic values."

The Black Freedom Agenda includes many typically social-democratic demands—for example: "We want a social policy agenda which invests in human beings. ... We want justice in the legal systems. ... We want a clean and healthy environment for our people." But two planks in the document are startling departures. One—"We want civil rights, affirmative action and compensation for centuries of institutional racism"—supports a reparations demand, long an item on the black nationalist agenda. The other is an item demanding an "end to homophobia and discrimination against lesbians and gay men," an explicit elaboration of the left's liberation agenda.

The congress also puts forth 11 "principles of unity." They include:

- We recognize the diverse historical tendencies in the black radical tradition including revolutionary nationalism, feminism and socialism.
- Gender and sexuality can no longer be viewed solely as personal issues but must be a basic part of our analysis, politics and struggles.
- We reject racial and biological determinism, black patriarchy and black capitalism as solutions to problems facing black people.
- We must see the struggle in global terms.
- We must overcome divisions within the black radical forces such as those of generation, region and occupation.
- We must forge a common language that is accessible and relevant.

These principles are intentionally broad, and the organizers hope that many people will agree with at least some of them. The organizers also made an effort to reach out to the next generation. Understanding that black youth, especially those influenced by hip-hop culture, are often attracted to images of cultural audacity and "no sell-out" authenticity, the framers of the Freedom Agenda used some rhetoric so soaring that many movement veterans winced. That black children are threatened "with the greatest dangers since slavery," is one well-circulated overstatement. "There were many discussions

about ways to prevent this from becoming just a gathering of 'seasoned' activists," says Alkalimat. "We wanted new blood, new language and creative new approaches to the struggle. We have a generational obligation to pass along a legacy of radical insurgency, and we didn't want to be rehashing old arguments that many of our people aren't even privy to."

Despite the big-tent platform, the gathering is still at ideological odds with most black nationalist organizations. "I wonder why they don't list the great movement of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association as a 'radical' movement?" asks Conrad Worrill, the chairman of the National Black United Front, the largest secular black-nationalist organization in the country. Garvey, a Jamaican immigrant, captured the allegiance of more blacks during the '20s than any leader before or since, and his organization certainly represented a radical challenge to the racist status quo. For those reasons, he is still a hero to nationalists. But Garvey's bombastic language always rubbed progressives the wrong way, and he championed capitalism, patriarchy and genetics. In many ways, his rhetoric was indistinguishable from that of German and Italian fascist groups of the same era.

Worrill understands this. "The question," he says, "concerns the definition of radical." For much of African-American history, nationalists and leftists have had different, sometimes clashing, views of the word. Garvey's racial radicalism was opposed by Du Bois and Randolph, who both advocated multiracial coalitions and socialism. Similar differences divide the congress' organizers from nationalist groups like Worrill's.

In fact, the Black Radical Congress formed, in part, because of the prominence of one particular nationalist group—the Nation of Islam (NOI). Ever since the Rev. Jesse Jackson's 1984 presidential campaign made Min. Louis Farrakhan a household name, NOI has been widely considered black America's most radical voice. That designation is strikingly inaccurate. With its theocratic focus, patriarchy and embrace of boot-strap capitalism, Farrakhan's NOI is one of the most conservative black organizations in the country. But by projecting itself as a voice of militant black nationalism, just as Garvey did, the group has captured the imagination of black youth and stepped into the vacuum left by the absence of truly radical black voices.

The NOI's Million Man March in October 1995 was the largest demonstration of African-Americans in this country's history, and it set the mold for subsequent gatherings. The October 1997 Million Woman March—and the Million Youth March scheduled for September 5, 1998—borrowed the spiritual tone and internal focus of Farrakhan's event. For many African-American youth, the NOI's "do-for-self" nationalism is the only radical doctrine they know. The Black Radical Congress seeks to change that by presenting a progressive agenda that contrasts clearly with the NOI's conservatism.

But nationalists are not the congress' only critics. Some observers argue that the term "radical" is out-of-sync with the times. "The concept of radical politics seems way out-of-date in this era because so much of the emphasis in black America has focused on electoral politics," says Ronald Wal-

ters, a professor of Afro-American studies and political science at the University of Maryland. Walters argues that the group could provoke unreasonably high expectations. "If you use the word radical, then you're obliged to deliver on some radical strategies," he says. "If you fail to deliver, then all you've done is set back the prospect of a genuine radical response."

Still, Walters is sympathetic to the Black Radical Congress and its call. Rather than contrasting the gathering with the Million Man March, he sees it as extension of the march's spirit. "I think the Million Man March, the Million Woman March and other mass demonstrations of popular discontent are responses to the conservative political culture in which we've been immersed since the triumph of Reagan," he says. The congress, he argues, is another manifestation of that response.

Not all African-Americans agree. Talking to a random sample of African-Americans on Chicago's South Side, I found little interest in a gathering of black radicals. Nikki Wittingham, an administrator in the Cook County public defender's office, was leery of the group's gender politics. "The black left's emphasis on feminism and its disinterest in the deterioration of the black nuclear family bothers me," she says.

"Rather than denouncing capitalism, those intellectuals should be trying to convince corporations to relocate in inner-cities," adds Edward Gordon, a retired janitor. "If that hap-

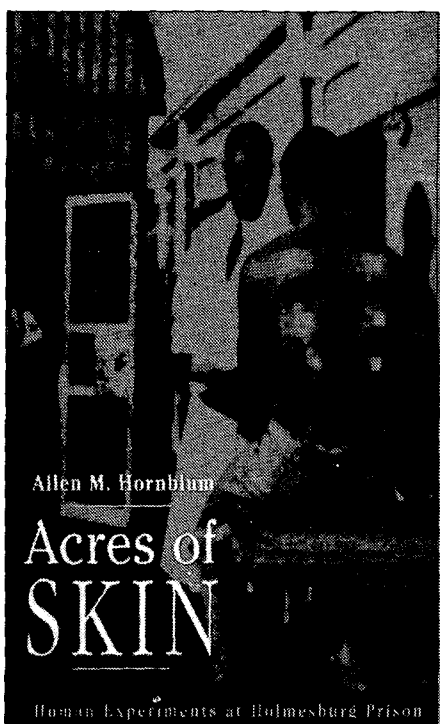
pened, it would take care of all our people's social problems. Everybody's a capitalist now. The argument's over."

The black left has always had a problem with its program because revolution is a hard calling. The nationalists, on the other hand, have succeeded because their programs are generally more mainstream. There is little popular opposition to programs designed to strengthen nuclear families and enhance mom-and-pop capitalism. And attempts to develop economic links between African-Americans and African countries, which nationalists have supported, are currently in vogue.

But all is not well in black America. The gap between the rich and poor is accelerating more rapidly among blacks than among Americans as a whole. There are the traditional problems of unemployment, miseducation and housing, which are worsening in many communities despite a booming national economy. Then there is the incarceration epidemic, HIV, environmental racism and continued attacks on gays, lesbians and single mothers by the moralistic right.

If the Black Radical Congress can help define the lines of privilege and explain the need to overcome them, it could help bring clarity to these muddled times. For even as the economy booms, many indices of well-being among blacks continue to hover at dangerously low levels. For much of the past decade, the path out of this morass has been guided by those urging a back-to-the-future return to separate-but-equal, patriarchal family arrangements and moral salvation. The Black Radical Congress is an opportunity to chart a more engaging and empowering course toward a truly emancipatory politics. ■

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Pulpit Politics

Religion and the Black Radical Tradition

By Michael Eric Dyson

The left's well known antipathy to religion derives in no small measure from a sophisticated tradition of misreading Karl Marx's famous statement that religion is the "opiate of the people." But Marx did not detest religious passion; he understood that religion was a crucial human response to oppression and a protest against suffering. In the few sentences that precede his fateful declaration, Marx wrote, "Religious suffering is at the same time the expression of real suffering and also the protest against real suffering. ... Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions." Clearly, religion was for Marx a symptom of an unacceptable state of affairs that demanded radical change. In the end, though, he was sympathetic to religion's desire to change the world. He wrote in 1881 of the parallel between "the early Christians in their struggle with the Roman Empire" and the coming of "a real proletarian revolution"—even if he disagreed with what they made of it.

It's clear that Marx and Engels—and a whole lot of oppressed folk before and since them—were ticked off by religion's refusal to engage the social and economic forces that harm humans. At best, religion had become passive or otherworldly in the face of suffering; at worst, it had become complicit in human oppression. But typical of the cultural and historical blinders worn by Western radicals and their contemporary American heirs, Marx and Engels overlooked the religious movements outside the orbit of European culture—which not only fought against brutal oppression, but sought to bring both salvation and a little bit of heaven right here on earth.

A striking example is the religion of black Americans.



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From the days of slavery to the present, black radicalism in the United States has been sustained by black religious ideals of freedom, justice and equality. The black religious tradition proves that radicalism and religious belief together can transform society. While it's a largely Christian tradition, there have been attempts to link spirituality and societal transformation by blacks in religious groups like the Nation of Islam, the Moorish Science Temple, the Black Hebrews, Garveyism, Rastafarianism, neo-African Yorubism, Father Divine's Peace Mission, Egyptocentric Kemeticism, Five-Percenters and so on.

From the very beginning, ever since black folks first converted to Christianity during slavery, there have been suspicions about how adopting the oppressor's religion could free blacks from the yoke of white supremacy. On the one hand, many white slave owners believed that conversion to Chris-

tianity would make their slaves docile and obedient. In fact, Frederick Douglass wrote that he met “many good, religious colored people who were under the delusion that God required them to submit to slavery and to wear their chains with meekness and humility.”

On the other hand, there were many slaves who believed that their religion gave them the power—and furnished them the principles—to rebel against slavery’s psychic and physical restrictions. Indeed, one of the reasons so many slaves converted to evangelical Protestant Christianity is the radical egalitarianism that the religion promoted. During the 1780s and 1790s, Baptists and Methodists provided religious spaces of worship that broke with the racial and social status quo. Some even advocated the abolition of slavery. As Baptists and Methodists became upwardly mobile and more respectable in the 1800s, most rejected the early antislavery pronouncements. But black slaves clung to the egalitarian vision revealed to them, they believed, by God. In any case, by then they’d already started their own churches and were aggressively advocating what religious historians Vincent Harding, Albert Raboteau and Reginald Hildebrand call a “Gospel of Freedom.”

Black defiance of white supremacy, then, was nurtured in black churches. Insurgent slave ministers like Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner led violent revolts against their slave masters, losing their lives but gaining “a better reward”—not because they died in search of heaven, but because they preferred rebellion and death to slavery. Harriet Tubman drew from black religious belief the inspiration to lead hundreds of black souls out of slavery.

The black church was greatly hated and feared by many powerful whites. In 1839, a New Orleans newspaper opined that the black church was “the greatest of all public nuisances and a den for hatching plots against [the] masters.” Besides the heroic efforts of Prosser, Vesey, Turner and Tubman, blacks found other ways to resist, some mundane, others more dramatic: work slow downs, singing spirituals with dual meanings, embracing atheism, urinating in food, aborting babies and committing suicide. While black religious narratives didn’t defend all these measures, the black church supported their ultimate aim: to liberate black people from the bondage of slavery and white supremacy.

The history of black religion since slavery has largely been a story of the quest for black freedom from oppressions. Hence, black religion has often been a stimulant and safeguard for the pursuit of a black radical agenda. There’s little doubt that Benjamin Mays’ contention that the antebellum Negro’s idea of God “kept them submissive, humble and obedient” is also true of elements of the black church today. In fact, Mays’ prized student Martin Luther King Jr. complained in 1967 that too many black churches were “so absorbed in a future good ‘over yonder’ that they condition their members to adjust to the present evils over here.”

But neither King’s early accommodationist protest strategies, nor his latter day radical democratic socialist leanings, erupted out of a historical vacuum. Figures like Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, Bishop Alexander Walter and the socialist

preacher Reverend Reverdy C. Ransom had sought to radicalize the black church more than a quarter century before King was born. Moreover, courageous black women have profoundly shaped the black church from its beginnings. As historians Sylvia Frey and Betty Cotton argue, black women formed the black church’s revival culture, structured its rituals of worship, gave it secure institutional grounds, spread its religious values between generations and forged the link between the spiritual and the material.

Even in this century, the black church has often been an unsung partner in the struggles of black radicals in the labor movement. In Memphis, Tenn., for example, decades before King led what would be his last march in solidarity with striking sanitation workers, the black church mobilized its forces to help develop a working-class left, to provide a place for white unions to meet and organize when no one else would have them, and to work for better schools and black voting rights. In fact, black religious sentiments were shot through union culture. Black laborers appealed to God to help them, and their white, often racist, counterparts, in their fight to organize. As historian Michael Honey relates, black Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union (STFU) organizer John Handcox turned the black gospel song “Roll the Chariot On” into “Roll the Union on,” and it became, Honey says, “an anthem for Southern unionism.” The connection forged between religiously inspired black workers who organized union drives and their white counterparts suggested the enormous potential of combining the union and the civil rights movements.

Given its grand legacy, the black church seems to have strayed from its radical roots. But that’s only half right. It is true, of course, that the largest black denomination, the National Baptist Convention, has been mired in leadership problems. The head of the church, Henry Lyons, has been indicted for misuse of church funds and has come under fire for alleged sexual indiscretion. And the growing social conservatism of black Christians, evidenced in anecdotal reports of their beliefs about abortion, premarital sex, school-prayer and gay rights, bodes ill for a healthy broad-based coalition among progressive groups, especially when some progressives are prejudiced against religion to begin with. But the Rev. Jesse Jackson remains a beacon for progressive black Christian interests, and a vital link to the, admittedly, greatly diminished radicalism of national black politics.

Under these circumstances, I’ll suggest five things that we and the current heirs to the radical black religious tradition should do to bring black churches back to their radical roots.

First, we shouldn’t give up on the black church, especially not the part of it that continues to agree with crucial elements of the radical black agenda: opposing white supremacy, addressing the failures of welfare reform, forging class solidarity among the working class, shoring up national unions, promoting school reform, defending reparations and affirmative action, advocating environmental justice, supporting full employment, arguing for national health care, opposing the death penalty and demanding the end of police brutality. Those who operate within the radical realm of black religion should join with committed activists throughout black com-

munities to transform our social and political life.

Second, the black church is a sleeping giant with an untapped potential to lobby and mobilize its voter base, a lesson that the often repulsive religious right has already learned. According to a 1984 National Black Election Survey, only 22 percent of blacks attended a church meeting in support of a candidate; 19 percent of churches took up collections for candidates during an election year; 10 percent worked for a candidate through the church. And in a 1983 survey of 1,800 black ministers, only half supported the use of the church as an instrument of social and political change. Of course, I'm not suggesting that radical black democratic energies are exhausted, or even best represented, by what occurs in electoral politics. Nor am I suggesting that grass-roots efforts by black churches, especially those that render crucial social services to local communities, are not equally important expressions of political sentiment. I am saying that there's a great deal of moral, economic, social and political influence being squandered by the black church.

Third, radical black religionists must wage mighty warfare against the profoundly conservative moral, religious and social beliefs of their brothers and sisters in the church and other religious institutions. The white religious right has made detrimental inroads into black religious institutions by appealing to the homophobic passions, patriarchal sentiments and nostalgic hunger for rigid family values that abound in our community. To be sure, many black conservative churches and the Nation of Islam promote such values as well. But the white evangelical invasion of black religious communities seduces blacks with visions of transcendence and neutrality. Even though white conservative evangelicals promote moral and political agendas that are harmful to the black community, black Christians are too often convinced that the Gospel is concerned only about our souls and our personal salvation. To speak of political, sexual, gender or racial issues in a progressive fashion, they say, betrays the Gospel's moral center.

Fourth, radical black religionists must oppose what Interdenominational Theological Center president Robert Franklin terms "positive-thought materialism," which posits that one's own health, wealth and success are the keys to salvation and neglects the social transformation, political activism and moral critique advanced by radical black religion. This religious belief has taken hold of black Americans who have entered the expanding black middle class as a way to justify personal aggrandizement, upward mobility, economic accumulation and material benefits, without being made responsible for how wealth is secured, generated or distributed. Further, it stigmatizes those who aren't healthy, wealthy and successful as inefficient bearers of God's gifts and grace, or as failures in the spiritual realms of prayer and holiness. In any case, they say, the poor are poor because they don't pray right, don't live right, or don't think right. In other words, the problem is individual, not social or collective.

Finally, radical black religion must be race-specific without being race-exclusive. True, in forging coalitions with other progressives, blacks and other racial minorities are often encouraged to surrender the particular claims they might press as a group in deference to a wrong-headed definition of "uni-

versalism." This, I believe, is precisely the argument we're now getting from left figures like Todd Gitlin, Michael Tomasky, and to a lesser extent, Richard Rorty. We're told that the scourge of identity politics has torn apart a plausible left movement, and that the insistence on special interests, especially from racial, sexual and gender minorities, has made the sundering of a viable radical politics a *fait accompli*. But this only makes sense if one ignores the tremendous struggle for human and labor rights that progressive blacks have always backed and given their life blood to. Still, radical black religionists must call upon black folk to accentuate their particularities and varied identities, while at the same time linking their struggles to the fight against homophobia, gender oppression, classism and the like. It's the right thing to do. But it's also a way of enlarging our awareness of the various ways black folk shape their identities and our understanding that all of those ways should be affirmed within our own complexly constituted groups.

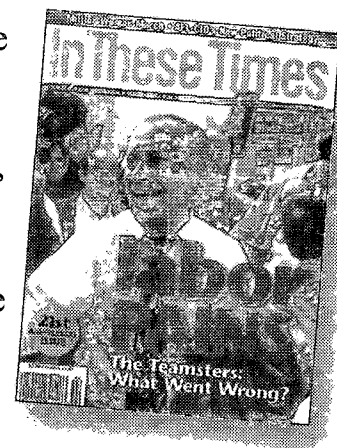
Radical black religionists must learn again to become good radical democrats in the public sphere, prophetic pests in the spiritual and moral spheres and insurgent activists in the civic realm. Whatever we do, we should remember to do one thing: translate our beliefs about love into concrete action. Justice, after all, is what love sounds like when it speaks in public. ■

Michael Eric Dyson, author of *Race Rules: Navigating the Color Line* (Addison-Wesley), is Visiting Distinguished Professor of African-American Studies at Columbia University.

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FEAR OF A BLACK FEMINIST PLANET

By Barbara Ransby

A few months ago, during Black History Month, I was a guest on a black radio station in Chicago. The topic I dared to speak out about was black feminism. I began with the innocuous assertion that black feminism aims not to divide black men and women, as is so often feared, but to challenge us all to be fully human by getting beyond the dominant society's definition of manhood and womanhood. The current gender dichotomy, I said, not only mandates a circumscribed role for my daughter, but tells my son he cannot be sensitive, emotional or nurturing without being considered soft and forfeiting his black manhood. During the call-in segment, I was beset by mostly male callers who expressed vehement hostility to what I had to say.

Why didn't my listeners want to hear it? It's threatening. While many of us in the black community have been able to critique the ways in which black people sometimes internalize racist, anti-black attitudes, we have not been as successful in analyzing the ways in which dominant notions about gender—masculinity, femininity and sexuality—have infected our thinking as well. As a result, the black feminist perspective gets left out of the increasingly male-centered discourse about race and community.

Given the level of hostility toward black women in general, and black feminists in particular, it is significant that we have been included as important players in the Black Radical Congress. Alongside its opposition to racism and class exploitation, the congress is on record in its opposition to sexism, patriarchy and homophobia. In fact, the congress is the first broad-based national coalition of progressive blacks that has included issues of gender and sexuality in the very definition of its purpose. Even though there continues to be a sometimes heated debate about how we understand and define these issues, the consensus of the group is that gender and sexuality must be on the table when discussing black liberation.

This was not always the case. Rethinking who we are as men and women on a fundamental level frightens a lot of people—even those who are prepared to radically reorder society in every other respect. Discussions about sexism and gender politics always have been difficult in the black community. Early black feminists—such as Michele Wallace, author of *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, and Ntozake Shange, who wrote the play *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf*—were criticized heavily for expressing some of black women's anger and frustration at the pervasive silence around issues of gender and sexism. While disagreement remains, even in black feminist circles, about the politics articulated in these works, Wallace and Shange should not have been the target of such venomous attacks.

These tensions survive today. Within the current discourse, statistics on black male homicide and imprisonment wholly overshadow comparable statistics about the rising number of African-American women in poverty, in prison and—as a result of male violence—in hospitals or graves. If a black woman discusses sexism, she is accused of being divisive. If she criticizes rapists, batterers or black men who denigrate black women as “bitches and hos” as a form of entertainment, she is accused of attacking all black men and airing our dirty laundry in public.

The “masculinization of blackness,” as one of my colleagues has described it, reinforces current misconceptions and half-truths about race and gender and discourages open discourse. Any black woman (or man) who speaks out about sexism, or challenges men to confront the issue, is subject to attack. In the wake of the Million Man March, for instance, a group of black feminists criticized the conservative politics and leadership of the event. They were called names, threatened and castigated as enemies of the race. Even Angela

Davis—who is widely revered in the black community as an activist and symbol of '60s militancy—was ridiculed on many black radio stations and on the streets of Harlem for daring to speak out against the march.

Racism within the mainstream, predominately white feminist organizations further fuels the reluctance of many people of color to even engage in a discussion about the larger issues of gender, patriarchy and sexism. Some white feminists have minimized or glossed over racial and class differences in the quest for a universal sisterhood. Black feminists have argued that this tack only reinforces racial and class hierarchies. However, because white feminists are seen as representative of all feminist politics, gender issues often get dismissed as “white” issues within the black community.

No one has fought harder to challenge and confront the racism within the women's movement than black feminists. As feminists, we are laying claim to a term that our more mainstream white counterparts define quite differently. This struggle over the definition of feminism is neither a compromise of principle nor an endorsement of racist or elitist feminists. To say, for example, that one is a Democrat does not imply wholesale endorsement of the current leadership of the Democratic Party. On the contrary, by identifying ourselves as feminists, we are contesting the meaning of a term that no one has a proprietary claim on.

The history and current reality of black feminism stands in stark contrast to the myths and distortions perpetuated inside and outside the African-American community. In the 19th and early-20th centuries, predating the use of the term “feminist,” black women, from educator and church activist Nannie Helen Burroughs to journalist, suffragist and anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells Barnett (and men such as Frederick Douglass), were combating sexism, male chauvinism and the denigration of black women. In her new book on black women blues singers, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, Angela Davis suggests that, as early as the '20s, these artists, grounded in the poor and working class black communities, were also critics of patriarchy, male sexual privilege, homophobia and the subordination of women.

The explicit use of the term “feminist”—or more recently

“womanist”—by African-American women began in the '70s and '80s, and was popularized through the writings of self-identified black feminist writers, activists and intellectuals.

So, what's in a name? By identifying ourselves as feminists, we openly proclaim a commitment to fight sexism, homophobia, misogyny and patriarchy, while also continuing to combat racism and class exploitation. As black feminists, we

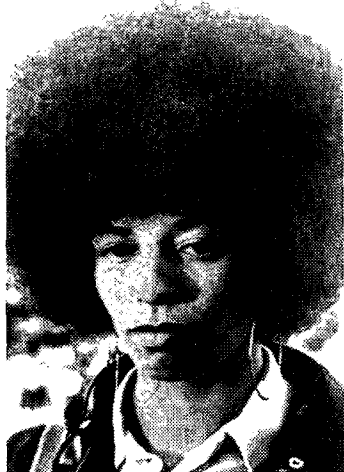
organize around a set of politics informed by the experiences of black people. As bell hooks points out, since black women are disproportionately at the bottom of the class, racial and gender hierarchies in American society, black women as a group have the greatest stake in the greatest degree of change.

A long list of black feminists—including Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Beverly Guy-Sheftal, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Evelyn Hammonds, Cathy Cohen, June Jordan, Jill Nelson, Paula Giddings and Marcia Gillespie—have argued that a black feminist vision must address not only multiple forms of oppression, but also, on some level, strive to forge a political alliance across gender, class and racial divides. In the context of these coalitions with black men, white women and other workers, black feminists have refused to rank gender over race or class in a hierarchy of oppression.

And just as black feminists have refused to accept hierarchies of oppression, we have also refused to artificially compartmentalize our experiences as women, people of African descent or workers. However, we recognize the importance of articulating a clear and explicit indictment of sexism. Sexism comes at us through powerful institutions and influences outside of our communities. Unlike white women, we are further humiliated and brutalized by police, social scientists and media pundits, who see us as promiscuous, lazy and stupid. And, even though we don't always want to admit it, sexism exists in the black community as well. Black women are raped, beaten in their homes and grabbed, slapped and beaten in the streets. Popular culture portrays us as gyrating sex objects and as symbols of male success, draped over the hoods of fancy cars or mewing at men's feet in music videos.

Black feminists have never argued that black men are our enemies. Racism and a shared sense of culture and history tie us to black men. At the same time, we have insisted on the

ARCHIVE PHOTOS



Even Angela Davis, a symbol of '60s militancy, has been ridiculed for speaking out as a feminist.



AP PHOTO/JOYCE NALTCAYAN

right to struggle with our brothers, and each other, about the issue of sexism. The Combahee River Collective, a black feminist organization, at its 1974 founding in Boston, issued a statement that articulated black feminist politics as revolutionary. It has become a manifesto of sorts for many black feminists: "We struggle together with black men against racism, while we also struggle with black men about sexism. We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy."

Black feminist politics are essential to any inclusive agenda for black liberation. On the economic front, black women are often the sole providers and caretakers for black children but are paid less than their employed black male counterparts. With the eradication of welfare and erosion of public housing, black women, children in tow, are being forced into the ranks of the homeless, and into subway tunnels, abandoned buildings, overcrowded shelters and prisons in record numbers. Yet the pernicious myth prevails that black women are getting ahead, at the expense, or in lieu, of black men.

Black feminists are not participating in the Black Radical Congress for cosmetic purposes or to create some type of political smorgasbord. Rather, we offer a political perspective that can, perhaps, help the larger black liberation movement transcend some of its past mistakes. Black feminists offer, not as a perfect model but a principled objective, that inclusive, egalitarian structures are the only legitimate way to build an effective movement for social change. We cannot replicate the

same competitiveness, elitism and chauvinism, so prevalent in larger society. We have to forge a different path.

The voices of black feminism, to paraphrase an E. Frances White essay, get us away from a rigid economic determinism that strives to alleviate one layer of oppression, while remaining uncritical of others. We know from painful experiences around the world that to fight for socialism and assume the "woman question" and other issues will take care of themselves is an ahistorical folly.

Just as most of us who identify ourselves as black radicals have come to the conclusion that class and race are inextricably linked in the American context (and throughout most of the world), black feminists have to grapple more seriously with the ways in which gender and sexuality are inextricably tied as well. A black feminist perspective does not offer a narrow, marginal "special interest" politics, nor can it be reduced to individual issues of "identity." Instead, black feminism embodies a revolutionary potential, for both men and women. We see the need to redefine exploitative class relations, dismantle racial hierarchies and, at the same time, redefine what it means to be men, women and sexual beings. Such politics are crucial for any fully liberating vision—if we are not afraid of the challenge. ■

Barbara Ransby, one of the conveners of the Black Radical Congress and a long-time community activist, teaches in the Department of African-American Studies at the University of Illinois-Chicago. She is completing a biography of radical activist and intellectual Ella Baker.



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Reviews

A Civil Action

A Place for Us: How to Make Society Civil and Democracy Strong

By Benjamin R. Barber

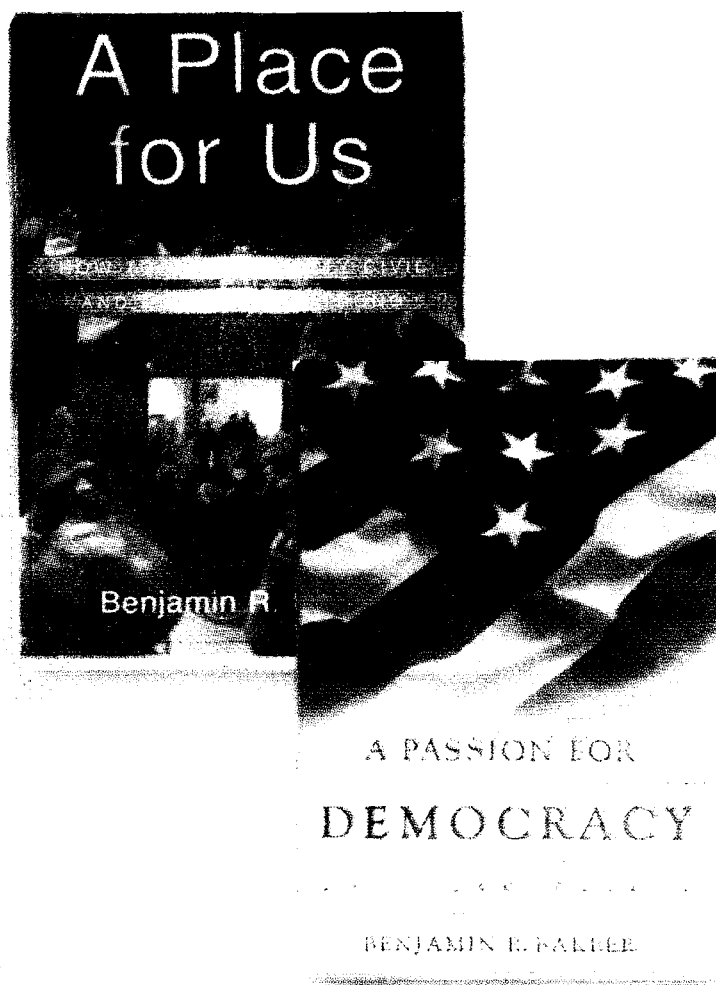
Hill and Wang
172 pages, \$23

A Passion for Democracy: American Essays

By Benjamin R. Barber

Princeton University Press
293 pages, \$26.95

REVIEWED BY ROBERT WESTBROOK



Five years ago, the expression “civil society” was identified principally with the ideals of dissident intellectuals who had suffered under oppressive communist governments in Central and Eastern Europe and with the revolutions that shattered those regimes. The term evoked an imagined realm of free association standing apart from, and against, the power of authoritarian bureaucratic states, as well as a future in which such a realm would flourish. It was the utopia of the velvet revolutionaries.

Of late, the phrase “civil society” has entered the altogether different terrain of American politics, in the process becoming decidedly blurred. Here the term invokes not a promised future but a presumptive past. From every point on the political spectrum, we hear concern today about the weakening of voluntary associations, trust and “social

capital” in the United States, and calls to restore “civility” and rejuvenate civil society—with little sharp debate about what that might mean. Blue-ribbon, bipartisan commissions on civic renewal proliferate, intoning the same passages from Alexis de Tocqueville to describe the rich social fabric of the local communities of a world we have lost. There is widespread agreement that too many Americans are bowling alone. But this seeming consensus has masked some profound differences about the causes of, and remedies for, the plight of our common life.

Political theorist Benjamin R. Barber, who has done as much as anyone to foster talk of “civil society” in this country, would like to put a sharper edge on that talk. In *A Place for Us*, a brief but keenly argued book, he sets out to do so. Barber has rightly sensed that it is time

to sort out the various versions of the term currently circulating in American political discourse, and to assess their respective merits. As he says, a notion that “promises salvation to every partisan may promise nothing in particular to anyone. Only a politics devoid of meaning can serve as a politics for every man.” Wedded though he is to civility, Barber would like to pick a fight over the idea of civil society. Nothing but good can come of this.

Generally speaking, as philosopher Michael Walzer has said, civil society has denoted “the space of uncoerced human association and also the set of relational networks—formed for the sake of family, faith, interest and ideology—that fill this space.” But various proponents of a reinvigorated American civil society have tended to

lend priority to different sorts of association and "relational networks."

Those whom Barber terms "libertarians" begin with a sharp distinction between the private and public realms, placing the coercive state in the latter and all other human experience in the former. Civil society is, for them, simply the "private sector" and, above all, the market. Operating with a conception of freedom grounded solely in voluntary, contractual relations, they reduce social life to "a series of deals that free individuals make in the name of their interests and goods and in defense of their liberties." Libertarians see their political task as one of protecting this civil society from the incursions of the state, and expanding it by privatizing activities currently invested in governments. The defining actor in their model of civil society is the rights-bearing consumer, and they offer only a thin and "shallowly instrumental" conception of social relationships. They are largely unresponsive to the yearnings for thicker solidarities that mark much of the current debate over the fraying American social fabric.

Those that Barber labels "communitarians"—practitioners of identity politics of all varieties—are quite responsive to these yearnings. They, like libertarians, see civil society as an essentially private realm. But their concern lies not with human associations that are contractual or voluntarily chosen, but rather with those that are "given" or "ascriptive"—such as families, religious communities and racial or ethnic groups. The defining actor for communitarians is "the bondsman tied to community by birth, blood, and bathos." Though they are wary of the state, communitarians are alert to the threat that market values pose to the thick solidarities they relish. And unlike libertarians, they are sometimes willing to use the state to protect those values or even to impose them on others.

Against these two notions of civil society and its incumbent politics (which he has elsewhere characterized as the alternatives of "McWorld" and "Jihad"), Barber poses the vision of the "strong democrat." The strong democrat regrets the almost wholly representative nature of modern democracy and hopes to

establish a fuller measure of direct participation by citizens in public affairs. Barber has been pressing the case for strong democracy for decades, in previous books and a host of scholarly and popular essays—many of which are collected in *A Passion for Democracy*.

For the strong democrat, civil society is a "third sector" standing apart from the market and the state, yet one comprised of voluntary and inclusive rather than ascriptive and exclusive groups. Neither wholly public nor wholly private, it is a realm of associations (civic alliances, parent-teacher organizations, political parties, public interest foundations, community-action groups, neighborhood associations and so forth) that work on behalf of the public good. The defining actors here are democratic citizens—"active, responsible, engaged members of groups and communities that, while having different values and conflicting interests, are devoted to arbitrating

Though Barber injects a lively adversarial note into the Tocquevillian torpor, he is more convincing in his account of the forces working against strong democracy than he is in his efforts to work up much hope that a stronger democracy might be within our grasp.

those differences by exploring common ground, doing public work, and pursuing common relations."

Social relations in this civil society are thicker than the contractual relationships of market exchange but not as "glutinous" or potentially oppressive as those of communitarian clans. Strong democrats would sustain and extend the realm occupied by civil society by decentralizing and redistributing public work to voluntary associations of citizens rather than by privatizing it in the hands of entrepreneurs. Their aim is to invigorate citizenship by reconstructing public life so as to invest greater power in participatory, deliberative associations within civil society, and they are willing to use the state to do so. The idea, Barber says, is "to downplay government as an end in itself or as the direct solution to social problems, and to emphasize it as a facilitating instrument of citizens who want to get their own public work done."

Thus far, the term "civil society" has been most fully exploited by American conservatives—of both the economic ("libertarian") and cultural ("communitarian") variety. Barber hopes to rectify this imbalance. His strong democracy is considerably to the left of either of these views, and a good deal more explicit about how corporate capitalism threatens democratic citizenship than anything offered by neoliberals like President Clinton.

Eager to distance himself from conservatives, Barber points not to the American state but the multinational corporation as the leviathan threatening civil society, and he is willing to advocate strong legislative measures to curb its ill effects on the democratic practices of citizenship. His program for "legislating civil society" includes not only a Clintonian call for "citizen-nurturing voluntarism" and a program of national service but also a "corporate civic compact" that is a guide to the various ways in which modern capitalism undermines civil society. (To wit: "We will treat the placement of our facilities and plants in particular venues as a primary social and civic commitment and will not operate or uproot them without considering the social

consequences for our employees and their communities, and without adequate compensation.”)

Given the importance of free and open communication to deliberative democracy and the education of citizens, Barber devotes particular attention in both books to the baleful influence of the handful of giant corporations that have secured control of the telecommunications industry. He proposes measures—such as a publicly subsidized civic Internet, electronic town meetings and a ban on television advertising in the public schools—to ensure that the civic potential of these technologies is not the victim of their wholesale commercialization.

Though Barber succeeds in injecting a lively adversarial note into the Tocquevillian torpor that has come to surround discussions of civil society in this country, he is more convincing in his account of the forces working against strong democracy than he is in his

Barber points not to the American state but the multinational corporation as the leviathan threatening civil society.

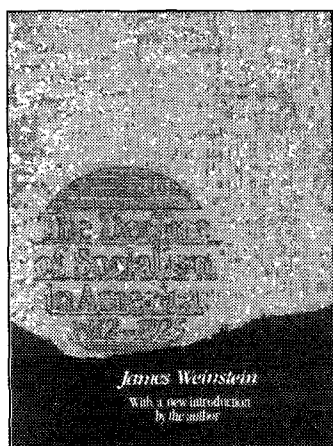
efforts to work up much hope that a stronger democracy might be within our grasp. Perhaps his most downbeat prognosis comes when he argues that either corporations “must give us back our government and, while pursuing profits, accommodate its encroachments in the name of the public weal, or they them-

selves will have to become more civic-minded and democratic, no matter what the cost to their profits. Anything else means the end of democracy.”

If this is the case, I would say the jig is up. But there is an alternative. Presuming enough Americans could be convinced that the obligations of democratic citizenship are worth assuming, we could *take* back our government and elect representatives who would pass the legislation Barber imagines. Barber is curiously reluctant to think out loud about the sort of politics that such legislation would require. But his legislative program requires legislative majorities. And that would require a party of strong democrats—that is to say, something other than the current Democratic Party. ■

Robert Westbrook teaches history at the University of Rochester and is the author of *John Dewey and American Democracy*.

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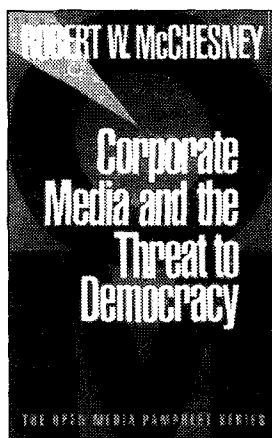
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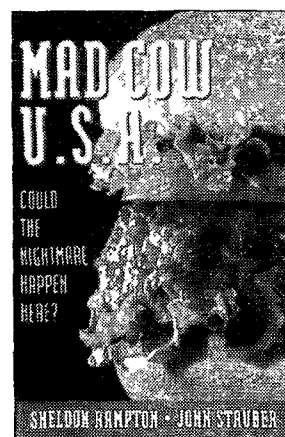


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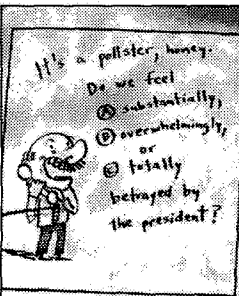
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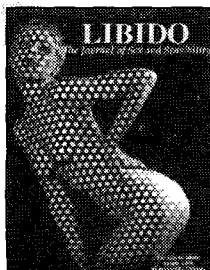
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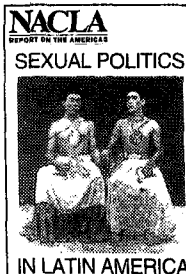
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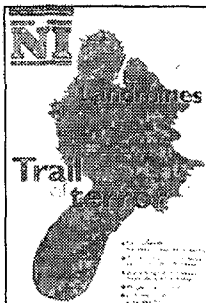
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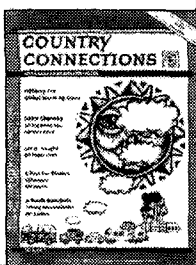


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was a reactionary crank whose high-handed refusal to help the inner city betrayed decidedly racist tendencies. I'd probably still be spouting that line if not for an encounter with his early work.

For nearly two years, I've been working on an oral history of public housing in Chicago. Six months into the project, I came across a soporific case study of the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) entitled *Politics, Planning, and the Public Interest*. Published in 1955, it was the first substantive book written about the CHA. When I picked it up, I was stunned. There on the spine was Banfield's name. I plunged into it, feeling like historian Richard Pipes must have when he gained access to Lenin's secret archives—the stuff that finally, irrefutably, revealed V.I. to be a devious, if brilliant, bastard.

The book focused on the CHA's 1949 proposal to build 40,000 units of racially integrated housing on sites throughout the notoriously segregated city. (Though the CHA has long been condemned as an uncaring warehouse of poor African-Americans, back then it was one of the nation's most progressive and best managed housing authorities.) The proposal was quickly killed by Chicago's city council, which was dominated by white aldermen intent on maintaining the city's rigid racial boundaries. By 1954, the city council had ousted the CHA's progressive administrators and had replaced them with lackeys more interested in pleasing political patrons than building decent housing.

In *Politics, Planning, and the Public Interest*, Banfield—far from being a crude racist—sympathized with the CHA's progressive goals. But even then he had a reflexive distrust of governmental means. Though acknowledging that the CHA had been well-run, Banfield suggested—on the basis of slim evidence—that the housing it had built in the '30s and '40s had made little positive impact on the lives of CHA residents. And with this as his working assumption, Banfield concluded that the demise of the CHA was not a terribly serious problem.

It's unfortunate that Banfield didn't consult with CHA residents. For the oral history I'm working on, researchers have interviewed more than a hundred residents of CHA buildings during the '40s and '50s. Virtually all of them talk about public housing as an institution that transformed their lives—and much for the better. Families that had bounced from one overpriced hovel to another suddenly found themselves in strong, stable communities.

Charlotte Young, a travel agent who grew up in the CHA's Altgeld Gardens development, described Altgeld as “a heaven.” Freed from the constraints of slum tenements, Young and her friends thrived. “Of all my friends from Altgeld,” Young says, “I don't know any that are not doing well. I mean, I can give you name after name after name.”

And long before William Julius Wilson was documenting the effects of concentrated poverty on urban neighborhoods, the CHA's managers strove to maintain a solid mix of working families in their developments. Bertrand Ellis, a recently retired banking executive who grew up in the Ida B. Wells Homes, says, “It was a community raising children. ... If

somebody else's mom saw you doing something wrong, she just picked up the phone and when you got home you had to answer to that. And that was very important.”

“That wasn't all of it though,” adds Ellis. “Ida B. Wells, when it opened, came fully equipped with a community center. The social workers knew that some of these people were recent migrants to the North and there were adjustments they had to make, so they had that support system in place. I remember as a little kid going there, getting our inoculations and dental work. All of those services were in that community.”

The authority's working model of public housing—sustained for nearly two decades—was far superior to the low-income housing provided by the private market.

In this light, Banfield's claim that “we do not know and never can know” how to solve social problems appears patently absurd. The CHA's early managers more than adequately understood the challenges facing their residents; and from the CHA's inception in 1937 until its sabotage in the mid-'50s, the authority managed to implement solutions that clearly worked for thousands of families.

But by the time Banfield wrote *The Unheavenly City*, he was so immersed in the elegant abstractions of free market theory that he had given up on social-policy solutions altogether. And for nearly three decades since, America's urban infrastructure has crumbled while those in power insist that nothing can be done. With an assist from Goldwater and his acolytes, Banfield's vision has become America's. ■

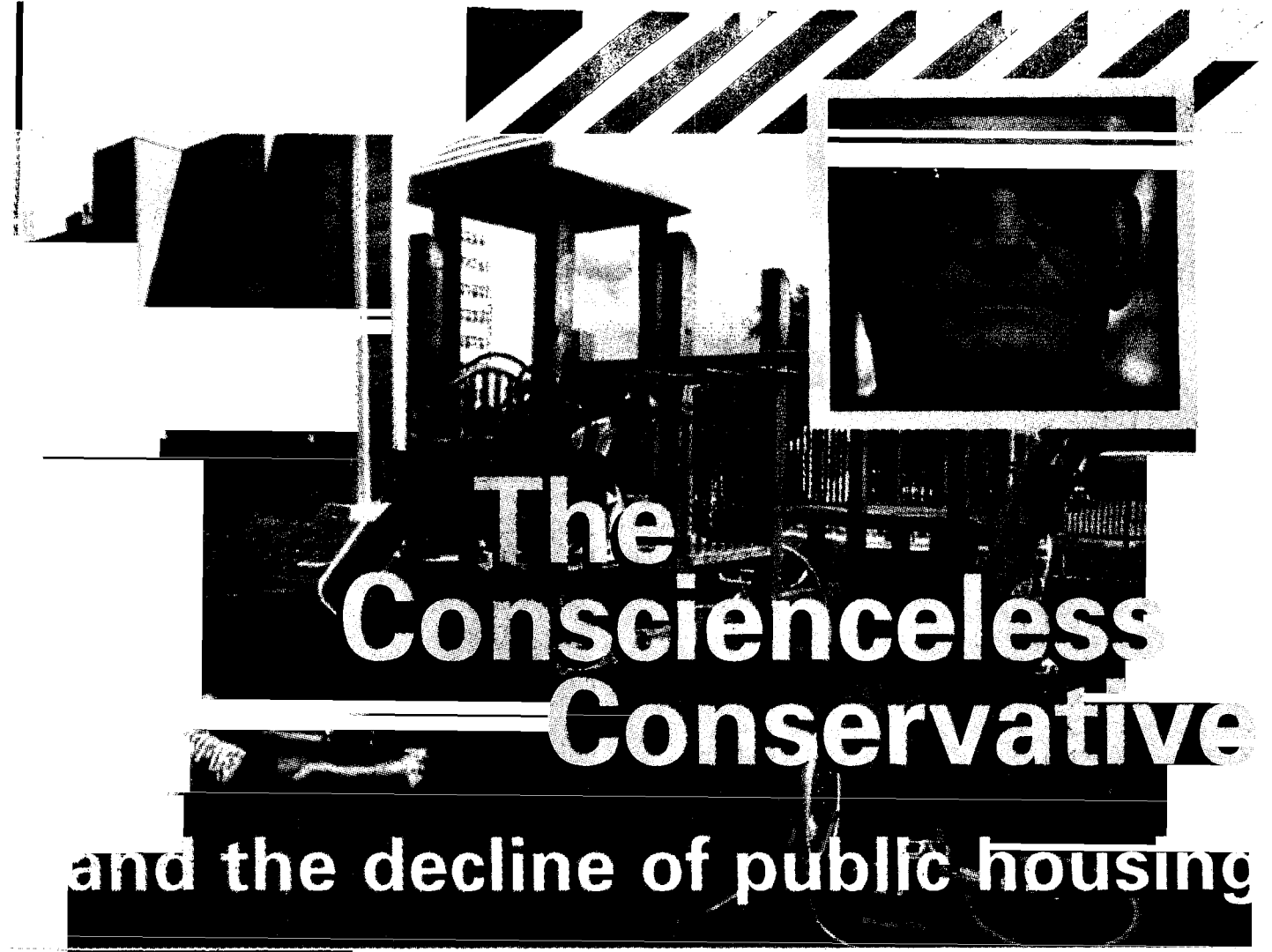
Jim McNeill is a former managing editor of *In These Times*.

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The Conscienceless Conservative

and the decline of public housing

By Jim McNeill

With the May 29 death of Barry Goldwater, the triumphalist interpretation of the Arizona senator's career has inevitably come to the fore. True, the eulogists admit, voters rejected Goldwater's searing libertarian rhetoric in 1964. But Goldwater's vision of America ultimately prevailed.

While this take contains more truth than the usual panegyric, it obscures some other important truths. It took a more cunning argument than Goldwater ever articulated to set the stage for the Reagan-Bush-Clinton rollback of the welfare state. Goldwater may have offered the initial inspiration for the assault, but he never bridged the intellectual chasm between the abstract economics of Milton Friedman and the degraded populism of the John Birch Society.

Who actually did? I would argue that it was Edward C. Banfield, the sadly neglected author of the classic 1970 anti-government tract, *The Unheavenly City*.

When Banfield's book was published, no one imagined that the statists of the Republican Party's Rockefeller wing would soon wither away. In Washington, Richard Nixon was establishing the Environmental Protection Agency and expanding affirmative action. In New York, Nelson Rockefeller himself was constructing one of the largest public uni-

versity systems in the world. But Banfield made a brilliant strategic move. Instead of engaging in a messy debate over where government programs had or hadn't worked, he focused relentlessly on the one place where they clearly had not—the inner city. He effortlessly picked apart the nation's anti-poverty programs, many of which had been hastily cobbled together by bureaucrats desperate to quell the urban unrest of the '60s.

Then Banfield applied his masterstroke. When confronted with the question that has haunted modernity—What is to be done?—he blithely replied: nothing. Absolutely nothing. It's the response that finally freed American conservatism from the false pieties of the Ripon Society. Why agonize over the suffering of the poor? "We do not know and never can know what the real nature of the problem is, let alone what might 'work' to alleviate or solve it," Banfield wrote. "Owing to the nature of man and society ... we cannot 'solve' our serious problems by rational management. Indeed, by trying we are almost certain to make matters worse."

Until recently, I'd never bothered to read any Banfield. I happily subscribed to the standard left line on him: He

Continued on page 29